THE LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

Class Mark S/PR 99.E7

Book Number 124 534

UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM
WITHDRAWN
FROM THE LIBRARY

PRESENTED

In Memory of
James Thomson Smillie
by his widow.
June 1952.

J Thomson Swillie.

UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM
WITHDRAWN
FROM THE LIBRARY
60 0403958 0

THE DELIGHT OF GREAT BOOKS

WORKS BY JOHN ERSKINE

FICTION

The Private Life of Helen of Troy
Galahad: Enough of His Life to Explain His Reputation
Adam and Eve: Though He Knew Better

ESSAYS

The Kinds of Poetry
The Literary Discipline
Prohibition and Christianity, and Other Paradoxes of the American Spirit

THE DELIGHT OF GREAT BOOKS

BY

JOHN ERSKINE

Professor of English Literature
in the University of Columbia

LONDON
EVELEIGH NASH & GRAYSON
LIMITED
1928

CONTENTS

		PAGE
I.	ON READING GREAT BOOKS	11
II.	CANTERBURY TALES	33
III.	MALORY'S LE MORTE D'ARTHUR	53
IV.	THE FAERIE QUEENE	75
V.	ROMEO AND JULIET	99
VI.	THE TEMPEST	127
VII.	PARADISE LOST	155
VIII.	THE WAVERLEY NOVELS	175
IX.	DON JUAN	199
X.	MOBY DICK	219
XI.	THE ORDEAL OF RICHARD FEVEREL	239
XII.	HUCKLEBERRY FINN	259
XIII.	CANDIDA	275
XIV.	MODERN IRISH POETRY	295

I

ON READING GREAT BOOKS

I

ON READING GREAT BOOKS

1

The fact that a book is famous is enough to scare off some people who, if they had the courage to open the pages, would find there delight and profit. We make the mistake of fearing that the immortal things of art must be approached through special studies and disciplines, and we comfort ourselves on the principle of sour grapes, by deciding that even if we were prepared to read the classics, we should find them dull. But one explanation of any long fame is that it was deserved, and the men who wrote these books would have been horrified if they had known that you and I might think of them only as matter for school and college courses. They wrote to be read by the general public, and they assumed in their readers an experience of life and an interest in human nature, nothing more. I shall try to speak of those aspects of books which make them immortal, or as we say, which keep them alive. What is called literary scholarship—a misleading phrase—we shall leave to the historians. I shall point out in these books what calls me back to read them again and again, what they say for an average man in our year, 1928, or, if you prefer, what our world looks like when we hold up to it these much-used mirrors.

I said that "literary scholarship" is a misleading phrase. To be scholarly in literature, I should think,

would be to know literature thoroughly, and to know it as art—to be sensitive to the life it expresses, to be wise in the psychology of the writer and the reader, to understand the kind of truth that can be said in words, and the kind of beauty language can create. So a scholarly musician, I should think, would be one who knew all the best music, and who knew the limitations of his art—what could or could not be done with sounds, what could not or could be expressed better in stone or paint. Robert Burns was a literary scholar in the true sense; he knew the whole body of songs of the type in which he worked, and he knew how to use his material.

But we have got into the habit of calling "literary scholarship" the knowledge of purely historical material, which surrounds a book as it surrounds anything else that occurs in time and place. No one in his senses would say that history is unimportant or uninteresting. But our studies in literature are usually arranged on the assumption that a knowledge of the history of a book will somehow introduce us to it, will help us to understand and to love. That assumption, I believe, is false. There is no connection necessarily between a knowledge of the approximate date when the Parthenon was put up and an architectural appreciation of the building. In fact, you could know the date without having seen the building. You can give a very scholarly lecture on Shakespeare without reading his plays. It has been done. But even if historical scholarship could introduce us to great books, the majority of mankind would not be free to make such an elaborate approach. A book which of itself says nothing to us, is doomed, and no amount of historical knowledge can rescue it.

What I have said implies, of course, criticism of the study of literature in schools and colleges. What we really teach under that name is history. I know very few classrooms in the United States where literature, as an art, is taught at all—and the condition is much the same in other countries. Personally I do not see why this art should not be as well taught as music or painting, and in these papers my intention is to discuss books exclusively as masterpieces of literature. But I should not care to seem hostile to the teaching of history. I am glad the children learn in school just when Shakespeare lived, and how many wives Shelley had, and why. I have seen an examination in one of our most scholarly colleges which asked, among other similar questions, how many English writers in the nineteenth century were addicted to drugs. The answer, if any one knew it, would have its own interest. My only quarrel with this kind of scholarship is that it goes under a false name, and it usurps the time which might be given to reading and enjoying great books.

Many people think the study of a writer's life is essential to an understanding of his work. If this is so, there would be an advantage also in knowing the state of society in which he wrote, the political or economic or philosophical ideals which controlled him. Recently we have been told that if we psycho-analyse the author, we shall read his book more intelligently. And of course, if the book is an old one, we should be philologians, and master the language in which he wrote. Mr. Kenneth Burke disposed of these fallacies rather brilliantly, I thought, when he wrote not long ago that to know what has happened and to know how and why it happened are two distinct kinds of under-

standing. But I should like to go further, and say that historical scholarship, of the various sorts just referred to, can never tell us how a masterpiece came into being. Biography is fascinating in its own right, and some poets have had exceptionally interesting lives. Of course we should be glad to know about Milton, or Byron, or Keats, as men. But all we can know about them as authors, is in their works. So distinct is the biography of a writer from his books, that Doctor Johnson survives in the biography alone. It is the greatest biography in English, by general consent, yet I never met any one who was inspired by it to read what Johnson wrote. Recently Mr. Krutch has given us a psychological biography of Poe, interesting in itself, and calculated, we are told, to increase our understanding of the poet—of the man, rather. Assuming that psycho-analysis is a science, and that Mr. Krutch's brand of it is the correct one, we learn from the book that Poe had certain complexes and inhibitions. What on earth has that to do with his poetry? Other men have had the same complexes and inhibitions—that is how the psycho-analysts know about them. But the other men did not write as Poe did. What makes him of importance as a writer is precisely that part of his equipment which he did not share with others. Literary or other artistic genius shows itself not in a man's life but in the work he produces. Until he writes a book, we refuse to believe our neighbour is another Dickens. If we cannot see it before he writes, I fancy it is an illusion which makes us recall afterwards the early promise of his talent. Where the genius is very great, as in Shakespeare, we are troubled by the absence of any promise, even illusory, adequate to such accomplishment, and the historian searches for more light.

But if you were to meet Mr. Wells or Mr. Mencken or Mr. Hergesheimer, without knowing that they were writers, you would never guess it, least of all would you guess what kind of book they wrote, and we may be fairly sure that outside of their books, literary genius showed as little in Shakespeare or Chaucer. This fact is so well known that it distresses young writers, particularly in romantic periods, and they wear their hair long, or otherwise remedy this defect of nature which permits a poet, apart from his poems, to go unrecognized.

Though biography throws little essential light on literary achievement, many thoughtful people have still believed that we ought to know the public circumstances in which a book has been produced, and the ideas and emotions of its period. I think we should know this, as history. Walter Scott wrote historical novels at a time when others were writing them, or attempting to. If he had not helped his friend, the learned Dr. Strutt, to mend a bad historical novel, perhaps he might not have tried his own hand at *Waverley*. If Hawthorne had not been living among transcendentalists, he might not have questioned so many of their doctrines in *The Scarlet Letter*. If Milton's age had not been concerned with the problem of divorce, he might not have said so much in his great poem about the relation of husbands and wives. But how far are we to go with this sort of thing? And what does it mean?

Those scholars seem to have a stronger case who say that the knowledge of the language the poet used should be part of the introduction to his work. Before you read Chaucer, you must know Middle English. Yes, and before you know Shakespeare, in the same sense, you must know Elizabethan English, and before you

know Tennyson, you must know the English of fifty years ago. But suppose I did know the language of each of these writers—I should then be in the position of one of their neighbours and contemporaries when the book came out—I should still have to read it, and interpret it, not by a knowledge of English, but by experience of life. Meanwhile, though my acquaintance with the language may be defective, it is surprising how much I get out of Tennyson, Shakespeare and Chaucer simply by reading them, as though they really were my contemporaries. Once more, I should be sorry to seem hostile to the study of languages; every new one we learn opens a fresh world. But we ought not to deceive ourselves. Many a conscientious student has completed an elaborate study of language in the hope that at the end he would know something about literature, only to find that he knew a good deal about language. The approach to literature is always through life, and if a book no longer reflects our life, it will cease to be generally read, no matter what its importance for antiquarian purposes.

I speak of all this not to attack methods of teaching literature—that might better be done elsewhere—but to dispel some of the prejudices which the historical method has created against famous books. Most people are awed by the difficulty of reading a classic. If scholars find it so complicated an experience, they argue, what could the average person make of it? Yet if you were to take the name of the author away from most of the great poems, novels and plays, and ask any intelligent reader to sample the work, as something not yet encumbered with erudition, he would probably discover in it just the same merits as have maintained its reputation down to our own day. I should like my readers

to approach the books we are to discuss, with this simplicity and with this confidence.

II

There are one or two characteristics of literature as an art, which we usually misunderstand. One of them is involved in the question of what the historical scholar calls "sources." Shakespeare wrote about Antony and Cleopatra; so did Plutarch, much earlier, and Shakespeare read Plutarch. Plutarch, then, is one of Shakespeare's "sources," and we can see how much Shakespeare got from the other man—that is, to what extent they resemble each other. Of course, their writings as works of art have not the slightest resemblance, and no one ever confused them. Even if we have not studied literature by the historical method, and even if we have not heard this word "sources," it is natural to recognize resemblance between one writer and another, and to feel that the later one imitated the earlier. There is a lazy tendency in our minds to classify things and people; we gravitate towards formulas, even though our better judgment suggests that truth lies in fine distinctions, and that the flavour and colour of life are produced by precious differences. If Milton's *Paradise Lost* seems to be telling over again the story of creation, as it is found in the first chapters of Genesis, we ought to re-read those chapters to see how far Milton has changed the story or added to it. The resemblances do not count; the differences are what make it worth while to read *Paradise Lost*. If the books were really alike, the world would probably remember only one of them.

In fact, very few great books ever had what we should call an original plot. I say "very few," to be prudent—I know of none. Two reasons have been suggested for this phenomenon, both of which may be true. It is said that the writer instinctively tries to address his possible readers in language they are most likely to understand, and if they are occupied with a certain kind of story at the moment, he will use that plot in his own way, as so much language, to say what he has on his mind. We are told also that the reader will instinctively look for more of the kind of story he likes, and the book which seems best in this kind will be praised until we accept it as a masterpiece. The illustrations of this tendency, so far as the reader is concerned, are many. A few years ago many of us were reading books about the South Sea Islands. The revived taste for this sort of book led naturally to a new interest in Herman Melville, and we decided that the masterpiece among South Sea stories was *Typee*, but it would be hard to prove that *Typee* inspired the recent accounts, and the recent accounts certainly did not inspire Melville.

Once you have understood the tendency of both reader and writer to rework old and familiar images of life, you can reason back from the experience we have to-day, and imagine how people received the classics when they first appeared. If Mr. Shaw writes about Cæsar and Cleopatra, we say he has modernized the old story, and if we don't like Mr. Shaw, we imply that he has taken a great liberty with sacred things. But all the great writers, it would seem, have modernized famous material—not always in the direction of humour, but sometimes so. Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, or Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, no doubt shocked

the classical antiquarian of their day. What extraordinary liberties Virgil took with Homer's plot and his characters! How Tennyson changes Malory!

If we usually feel in a great work of literature that the tradition has been modernized, our feelings are guiding us correctly, I believe. In the finest books there will always be some elements of alloy, something contemporary and local, which readers in another time and place cannot recognize, and if the book continues to be read, the wish grows in us to get rid of the dead parts. We wish the mirror to be clear when we look into it. We wish to see only our own face. The reader achieves this end by skipping. The publisher does it by getting some one to edit the text. The creative genius does it by rewriting the book.

The point of view I am stating is not everywhere accepted. Many readers like to think of books, and, I suspect, of life, as far more static than they seem to me. They are of the same philosophy as those who object to Hamlet in modern costume. They think that the tradition should be sacred. Personally, I have no quarrel with the tradition, and I think those friends of mine are rather weak of imagination who find it necessary to put Hamlet in a golf suit. But the same reasoning prevents me from holding too fanatically to the tradition. Either the modern dress or the traditional ought to satisfy. What dress the original Hamlet wore I do not know, and he surely did not speak English. If the play were given in Shakespeare's language, with his pronunciation, it would sound foreign to my ears. So I accept the modernization as a law of nature, and should be offended only if the essential drama were lost. It cannot be, so long as man concerns himself with such problems of life and death as bothered

Hamlet. If my uncle had murdered my father and married my mother, I should feel I ought to do something about it, but in this introspective day of ours I should have a hard time deciding what to do. My uncle might be a simple criminal, or he might be a case for the psychologists. Meanwhile, if my mother had a hand in the crime, I'd rather not know it, but if I didn't know, I should have to keep on speculating about it. In what costume should I go through this agony? To me it makes no difference. Hamlet, I find, is very like myself, and I can live the part in any dress. Othello, on the other hand, begins to be out of date. I don't like to see him smother his wife, and what's worse, I no longer feel, as gentlemen once did, that in the supposed circumstances she just naturally had to be smothered. The play is full of splendid verse, much quoted, but as a whole it badly needs rewriting. Shakespeare is among the greatest of the great, but this play of his I no longer care to see.

III

If we accept the idea that literature is a changing thing in the hands of the writers, there ought to be no difficulty in agreeing also to the idea, already implied, that it is a changing thing in the hands of the readers. Whenever we read a book we love, we change it, to some extent. We read into it our own interpretations, and the meanings which the words have taken on in our time. If a book is so rigid that it cannot lend itself to these fluctuations, it is useful only while it seems strictly true, and afterwards it is completely out of date. Telephone directories and time-tables are the extreme

examples, but all novels or plays based on scientific fact run this risk. The instance of spontaneous combustion in *Bleak House* is a weakness in an otherwise fine story, because, no matter how impressive the description, we no longer believe it is possible, and no interpretation will save it. All the novels which now rest on hypotheses of psycho-analysis, and biographies which make generous use of the same theories, will at once be superannuated if science shifts its ground. The great books are those which are capable of reinterpretations, which surprise us by remaining true even when our point of view changes. This is why we rank Homer and Virgil and Dante, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Cervantes, and Molière so high—because they still say so much, even to peoples of an altogether foreign culture, a different past, an opposed philosophy. Once in a while a writer or a school of writers appears in rebellion against this principle of the psychology of art, deliberately trying to produce something which shall simultaneously be faithful to the immediate environment, in the sense in which the telephone directory is correct, and also be of permanent interest. In so far as they succeed in the first ambition they usually fail in the second. Ben Jonson was this kind of realist; he wished to make plays, not out of imaginative material, as his friend Shakespeare did, but out of the life he knew, and he promised to report the actions and the language of the men and women about him. Perhaps he did so; it is for the antiquary to say. To the average reader he is now a bookish name, except for a few songs, in which he modernized themes from the Greek mythology. Obviously Browning was closer to the ordinary facts of his time, to its speech, manners and problems, than Tennyson, but the mass

of his work begins to be much harder to understand. We should all like to seem modern in our books; nothing hurts a writer so much as to be told he is out of touch with the age he lives in. But the realists who have tried to be modern by being strictly contemporary, have gone down with the fashions they anchored in, whereas the writers of other days who still seem modern, must have provided us from the first with something more like a mirror of life than a photograph.

This means, of course, that what we enjoy in a book may not be what the author intended to express. I do not see how we can escape this conclusion, though most study of literature assumes that the purpose in reading is to find out what the author wanted to say. Even the unliterary take it for granted that we write in order to express ourselves. Yet it is the audience in art who are expressed, not the creator. What he has created is a magic surface in which they can see themselves more clearly than elsewhere. Gratitude makes them feel that the artist must have been a kindred spirit, and they say they understand him. No historian of literature, however, would admit that Shylock was as tragic a character to Shakespeare as he is to us. This is only the most familiar of many famous illustrations. There is a passage in Malory which we believe once delighted the reader as showing the fine courtesies of chivalry. Lancelot disguised himself in Kay's armour, and rode out to see what would happen. He met four fellow-knights of the Round Table, who mistook him for Kay, as he expected. Being high-spirited gentlemen, in a roguish mood, they decided to knock their friend Kay out of his saddle. The first one tried it, but Lancelot "smote him so sore that horse and man fell both to the earth." The second tried it, with the same result. The

third man Lancelot knocked unconscious. The fourth fell with his horse on him. Lancelot rode on to the king's palace, and when the four arrived, and saw him there in Kay's armour, "then there was laughing and smiling among them." The passage has its delight for us, looking from our standpoint at this specimen of humour. It may be that we enjoy it more than Malory's early readers did, just as we get a deeper profit, or so we think, from our tragic Shylock than the Elizabethan groundlings could have had from their comic Jew-baiting. But in neither example is it likely that we have the author's point of view, and I doubt if it is desirable or worth while to search for it. The reason men have said that great artists are inspired, is that great artists create more than they know—meanings they have not heard of, beauty they have not seen.

This is to say again the old truth, that art is a constant collaboration between the artist and the audience. Once the work is created, it leaves the author's hands for ever—the readers remould it, or neglect it. Yet in such a shifting stream of interpretation there is more stability than at first appears. There is something constant in human nature. There are facts of life which do not depend upon fashions for their existence, nor upon philosophy for their importance. Birth, death, hunger, love, hate, the two sexes for ever facing their own attractions and antipathies—it is a fair guess that men will recognize these elements of experience for a long while. Cowardice is as easy to detect as it ever was. When Moses came down from the mount and found the people worshipping the golden calf which Aaron had fashioned with a graving tool, he took his brother to task, and Aaron replied, "I cast the gold into the fire—and there came out this calf." Similarly

the attitude of heroism is clear, in whatever fashion it shows itself, though the Persian spy, according to Herodotus, did miss the point of the Spartan preparations for death, as they sat in the sun and combed their long hair.

IV

The account of reading which I have just given, as a creative process in which we all take part, and in which we constantly re-interpret books to respond to our needs, may seem to imply a dark scepticism as to the possibility of knowing or stating any certain and permanent truth. You may grant there are invariables in human nature, yet ask if I have not denied a place to universal principles which lie outside of men, and which science and religion are supposed to formulate.

That there are such principles, I certainly would not deny. That it is easy for man to state them, no scientist or theologian would claim. The question is important here because a fair consideration of it helps us to see what imaginative literature, as distinguished from science or theology, can do for us, and what, therefore, we should look for when we read an imaginative book. All that I have said has been an argument against confusing literature with science. In a great poem or novel we should find a reflection of ourselves. The truth such a work should have is the kind we want in a mirror. Human language, with its power to suggest, to call up images, to sound overtones, to mean a dozen things at once, is a good instrument for rousing emotions and imagination. The fact that words will change their meanings, gives the writer hope that his

work may continue to be read, and even for his immediate audience he chooses words which will mean as many things as possible, so that all temperaments may be reached. But with such a loose instrument the scientist or the theologian is helpless. What he usually does is to invent a language of his own, a special vocabulary, to which he hopes no emotions or other hazy elements will attach, and by which he intends to say one thing and nothing else. Since it is hard to find words absolutely bare of imaginative suggestion, the scientist takes the logical step, and sooner or later invents symbols, such as we meet in mathematics. Now he can tell the truth. But unfortunately, the language which he has achieved lacks one essential of communication—except by the initiated, it cannot be understood. A large part of the difficulty of all science lies in its artificial language. Of course the scientist, seeking truth, never intended to hide it in a cryptogram, and after a while he begins to worry because so many of us are not in the secret. He then interprets the symbols—puts them in plain words—that is, in unprecise words, in the language of which our poetry is made. We take up the little book which makes Einstein neighbourly, and we are relieved to find that our brain is good enough to follow the doctrine. "But remember," says the scientist, "what you are reading is not exactly Einstein—it is a popularization." There we are, back again where we started.

The difficulty which science faces in language is a profound one. But it does not arise in literature, unless we go to imaginative books for what only science can give. The business of science is to increase our knowledge and our use of truth, but the function of

imaginative literature is to increase our sense of life and our vision of it. If we distinguish the two functions, we shall not be disturbed that books take on new powers with new readers, nor that we find in them ourselves rather than the author. We shall perhaps be ready to admit that a knowledge of the author's life is of less profit as an introduction to his writing than consciousness of our own lives. We can understand how little the study of history and the study of literature have to do with each other—history, one of man's many attempts to tell the truth, at least temporarily, about other people—and imaginative literature, man's perennial attempt to realize himself as he is.

Yet since language is forced into a double service, it is not surprising that the scientific spirit tends to invade literature, and always to its detriment as a work of art. The formulas of science change quite as fast as the interpretations of a poem, but though it is fairly easy for us in our artistic conscience to admit without regret that the interpretations do change, in the part of us which seeks truth we find it hard not to believe our version of truth is final. If truth is variable, where are we? We translate and make the question personal —if our version of truth must be revised, what will become of the world? That which we profoundly believe, we wish to be permanent. The more we admire the steps by which nature has come from the first wriggle of life up to us, the less we feel the need of further progress. Many people who believe in evolution are probably convinced it has stopped.

In almost every great book there is a dead spot or two which once expressed an ardent belief in truth—a belief so ardent that the writer tried to put it into final and inflexible words, and alas! he succeeded. In

the old epics the theology seems less civilized than the picture of human life—the gods behave less well than men. The fact is, the poet left us free to interpret the men in our own image, but he told what he believed to be the pious truth about the gods. There is a large area of this sort in *Paradise Lost*. Because so many of us have found Milton's theology impossible, we perhaps have thought of him as a particularly narrow-minded ancient. But we do the same thing now. With us truth is stated more often as science than as theology, but with the same untenable assumption that our version of it will stand. In a hundred years I suspect Ibsen's *Ghosts* may seem antiquated, so far as concerns the science implied in it, but the mother and the minister will probably still reflect some modern characters.

V

The method I should advise in reading great books is a simple one. I should try, first of all, not to be awed by their greatness. Then I should read without any other preparation than life has given me—I should open the pages and find out how much they mean to me. If I found my experience reflected in some parts of the book and not in others, I shouldn't worry about those blind spots. They may be the fault of the book in those places—it may be out of date. But it is more prudent of me to suppose, what is just as likely, that my own experience is perhaps a little thin in the regions those parts of the book dealt with. To find out which is so, I should read the book a second time, and a third. Whether or not the repeated readings

clear up the difficult pages, they will show me new meanings in the part I already understand.

When we encounter these dead spots in books supposed to be masterpieces, and when we are humble enough to explain them by some insufficiency in ourselves, the impulse is to go for help to other books, to works of criticism. It is much more profitable to go directly to life. I won't say that no aid can be had from other people; I could not believe that and keep on teaching literature, or even write these papers. But the best teachers of literature, in my opinion, try to suggest the experience which such passages are designed to reflect; they remind their hearers of experience mislaid for the moment; they can only remind—they cannot impart it. We do as much for each other, far from classrooms, whenever your casual enthusiasms open my eyes to a beauty in art or in nature which I overlooked, but which I am ready to admire. Sometimes I ask a student in class to tell me the plot of the book we are about to discuss. I have never listened to an honest summary of that elementary sort without learning something new about the story; I have seen it now through another person's life. In fact, there's no better way to measure personality than to ask for the outline of a story you know well. But most of this experimenting we can do on ourselves. We can overhaul our experience, to find the material needed to understand the book; we can open our eyes to life about us, and find the material there. It is fatal to suppose the great writer was too wise or too profound for us ever to understand him; to think of art so is not to praise but to murder it, for the next step after that tribute will be neglect of the masterpiece.

It is advisable to sample as many of the great books

as we can, for the first ones we come to may not be those which reflect us most completely. But once we have found our author, we have only to read him over and over, and after a while to read out from him, into the authors who seem kindred spirits. When the reader has found himself in two great authors, he is fairly launched.

But the books should be read over and over. Until we have discovered that certain books grow with our maturing experience and other books do not, we have not learned how to distinguish a great book from a book.

II
CANTERBURY TALES

II

CANTERBURY TALES

At first sight Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* will call to mind Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. The language seems to be somewhat the same, the scale of the narrative is equally large, and in both cases the poet left his ambitious work unfinished. If the reader happens to know that Spenser called Chaucer "the well of English undefiled" he will naturally conclude that there is a connection of some sort between the two great poems.

Nothing is stranger in literary history than Spenser's admiration for Chaucer, for the two poets were as unlike as genius can well be; they were masters at opposite poles of art. Spenser, concerned with æsthetic problems, invented a modernistic method of his own, and makes upon us the impression of all scholarly and calculated craft. He holds his place in poetry for the nobility of his spirit and the beauty of his ideals, but he seems less a master of human life than of books. Chaucer, on the other hand, with no openly stated theories of art, makes an astonishing modern impression upon us still, and though his craftsmanship is of the finest, we delight in him as in Shakespeare, chiefly for the extraordinary knowledge he shows of human nature.

The language used, the Middle English of the fourteenth century, is, of course, in no respect artificial speech. It must have sounded delightfully colloquial to his first readers. For us it now presents certain

difficulties, though not of the kind we might expect. Any intelligent reader can make out the rhythms of the lines by pronouncing all the syllables, and such a reader, especially if he knows German, can guess at almost all the words. The difficulty lies in the fact that many words and expressions in Chaucer, though they are close to forms we use, had in his time a very different sense. We are likely to be deceived, that is, by the apparent resemblances between his speech and ours. Yet even this difficulty can be easily overcome. The charm of his stories is so great and the structure of the plot so clear that any reader can get much more than the gist of it without recourse to a dictionary, and the reader who has patience to look up the puzzling words and phrases will soon find the whole page intelligible.

In the beginning of the tale of the Wife of Bath occur eight lines which illustrate the difference between Spenser's view of the world and Chaucer's. They are fair samples of the average difficulty of Chaucer's verse.

> " In the olde dayes of the King Arthour,
> Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
> Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
> The elf queene with hir joly companye
> Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede;
> This was the olde opinion as I rede.
> I speke of manye hundred years ago;
> But now can no man se none elves mo."

This is as we might speak nowadays when fairies are out of fashion, but Chaucer had our temperament in the fourteenth century. What he was interested in was people; men and women of all classes. His own world was that of a court, but he had such a love of the soil and of the common people who lived close to it as in his age distinguished the best of European literature

everywhere. He liked the animals and the birds one meets in the barnyard; he liked the sights and sounds of the meadows and forests; the little dramas which enact themselves in small villages, and the great tragedies and comedies of high life. An immense social interest, as we should say, except that he had no modern concern for society—his concern was for humanity. The difference is too obvious to need much elaboration. He looked on society very much as he looked on the scale of the animal world, from the nobler creatures down to the pigs in the trough. There were obvious distinctions in charm and merit, of course, but all creatures were interesting. In human society, also, the distinctions are obvious, but even the unworthy have their appeal.

With such a taste for life the poet would naturally adopt a scheme for his poem which would exhibit society on a large scale. As in the case of *The Faerie Queene*, our understanding of the *Canterbury Tales* depends upon our knowing how it all began. But there was no danger that a man of Chaucer's hard sense would leave his introductory material to the end. He began with a prologue, which in the opinion of some readers is the finest part of the whole work. Here he tells us that in April, when the roads were beginning to be passable, and when, therefore, the various people who had vowed to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas of Canterbury began to carry out their pledge, he was stopping at the Tabard Inn in Southwark. The inn was a prosperous one, since it was on the road taken by pilgrims Canterbury bound. The poet, therefore, was not surprised that by night-fall there were about thirty guests all travelling to the shrine—a most miscellaneous aggregation of gentle folk, vulgar fellows,

friars of questionable character, priests of undoubted goodness, the famous nun, head of her priory, young and exquisite, and the equally famous Wife of Bath, fat, vulgar and obscene—a sort of female Falstaff.

The host of the inn proposed that this goodly company should enliven the journey to Canterbury and the journey back by telling stories, each in turn, and he offered to make the pilgrimage with them and be the arbiter of this literary rivalry. The *Canterbury Tales*, therefore, is a collection of the stories told on this ride, at least so far as Chaucer completed the outline.

Obviously the device of the Canterbury pilgrimage is merely another scheme in the medieval fashion for gathering up a large number of isolated stories. In *The Decameron*, the most famous book of this sort before Chaucer, Boccaccio pretended that his ladies and gentlemen were quarantined in a castle and passed the time in story-telling. But the peculiarity of Chaucer's device is that the people who tell the stories are as interesting to him as what they tell. His portraits of them in the Prologue are masterpieces of psychological description, and when we come to their stories we discover that each tells what is proper to his or her character. This dramatic fitness had never before been observed in the collections of short stories, and indeed could hardly be observed except by a writer with Chaucer's genius, or Shakespeare's, for the portrayal of character. Between every two stories there is some conversation among the pilgrims—a word of comment of praise or blame for what has been said. In these link-passages the cavalcade stands before us as vividly as though we were watching a play. Not once does Chaucer let his characters slip from the portrait he has first given of them, and some of the tales are obviously

suggested by ill-feeling and by rivalry among the travellers. In the very first block of stories, for example, after the knight, a splendid gentleman returning from an honourable career in the wars, the miller tells an anecdote. It is not his turn to speak, but he is drunk, and the host cannot stop him.

> "Our hoste answerde, tel on a devel way,
> Thou arte a foole, thy wit is overcome."

The miller rises in his stirrups and asks for attention, but first confesses that he is drunk; he knows it by the way his voice sounds. He therefore craves indulgence if anything in the story should be amiss. It was an apology much needed for he had made up his mind to tell an incident of a carpenter and his wife, most uncomplimentary to the carpenter and scandalous for any ears. Close by in the cavalcade was riding a reve, or bailiff. This reve, whom the miller disliked, was also a carpenter. Chaucer puts in a word for the good taste of his own performance here by telling us that if we don't like disreputable stories we had better turn over the leaf and go on twenty pages farther, where there are admirable moral tales recited by the more proper characters. But the miller was a churl, he says, and so was the reve, and they talked like that sort of person. Here is a plea, one of the first in our literature, for dramatic truth in characters.

While the miller is insulting the reve with his story, the victim manages to avoid apoplexy by thinking of a good yarn at the miller's expense—in fact, one of the finest, though not the most delicate, in literature. They try to stop him from telling it, but when the effort is vain, the knight and the prioress and the other gentle folk ride on and listen as little as they can, while the

vulgar part of the cavalcade gets the full benefit. Other groups of stories are bound together by the same dramatic device. This is enough, however, to show Chaucer's tendency to make the drama grow out of the characters themselves, and out of their mood at the moment.

From such a splendid collection of stories it is hard to choose typical examples. The range of Chaucer's genius, however, and his closeness to the ideals of modern novelists will be clear if we look at the picture of society he gives in the Prologue, then examine the knight's tale, the nun's priest's tale, and the pardoner's tale, masterpieces all.

It seems hardly probable that Chaucer arranged the characters in the Prologue with a conscious eye to any social scale, yet the characters do fall into rather suggestive groups. First comes the great knight back from strenuous wars, a very perfect gentleman, as Chaucer calls him. High-minded, a little austere in his manner, refined in his tastes, he moves among this queer assemblage with the air of one who has seen much of life and is surprised at nothing. He has with him a squire, his young son, who some day will be like his father, but who at present is occupied with love-songs and the other paraphernalia of romantic youth. With them is one servant, armed with bow and arrow.

Next comes the prioress attended by another nun and by three priests. She is young and beautiful, cultured above the average, rather fastidious in taste, and, one suspects, with many aptitudes for the worldly life. We are not sure of an exclusively religious meaning in the motto *Amor vincit omnia* which was written on the brooch she wore. Her attendants are well dressed and well mannered like herself. Together with the knight

and his party, she and her followers illustrate the upper class of refinement, suggesting the court, which is not otherwise represented in the pilgrimage.

Next come the monk and the friar, in whose portraits Chaucer expressed the criticism which his age felt for the priest who was not doing parish work, but who was wandering through the land at large on what appeared to the laymen rather doubtful errands. There seems no particular reason why these two should be introduced at this point in the Prologue. It will be noticed that at the end of the list of characters the poet returns to this criticism when he portrays the somnour and the pardoner. We should remember that Chaucer is not speaking as a Protestant antagonistic to the medieval Church. He is a member of that Church himself. We shall understand him best if we read into what he says here our modern criticism of the unprofitable aspects of institutional life, especially our resentment against the unreligious aspects of organized religion.

Next comes a group representing the upper middle class—the merchant, the clerk of Oxford—university student, as we should say—the lawyer and the franklin, or substantial householder. Chaucer portrays these four, not with the individual precision which makes the knight and the prioress stay in our memory as people we have met, but with certain broad, typical strokes which give us the general feeling of the social background. We suspect some irony here in the contrast between the mood of the merchant, the lawyer, and the householder, all thoroughly materialistic, and the spirit of the pilgrimage they are undertaking.

Next comes a still larger group of types representing the working man of the prosperous sort, representatives of powerful guilds—the haberdasher, the carpenter, the

weaver, the dyer, the upholsterer. Chaucer describes with some care the richness of their costumes and furnishings. Perhaps they are the officials of the guild and enjoy rich emoluments. With them are a sailor and a cook, not quite so prosperous, but far from poor. The sailor in particular is a sardonic person, most competent in charting his voyages, and rather given to piracy as an incidental occupation. Whenever he manages to capture and loot another vessel he makes the unfortunate vanquished " walk the plank " in order to keep his own record clean. After such exploits, of course he would feel the need of absolution. One suspects that his presence in the pilgrimage indicates some recent profitable murder of this sort. With him the doctor is described, eminently more respectable, but perhaps not less murderous in his total effect on human society. And after the doctor comes the immortal Wife of Bath.

In these days of Freudian theory we have many terms with which to describe this astonishing woman, but no one has portrayed the type so well as Chaucer. She has, as we should say, no inhibitions and no repressions of any sort; one is tempted to add that she has no virtues either, yet we like her as we like Falstaff, for certain delicious qualities of truth and nature. Her main business in life, as she explains to the company, is respectability and sex, marvellously combined. She has married some half-dozen husbands, all of whom found life too strenuous and promptly died. The poor woman looks on this record as a sort of jest, not misfortune, God sends to those He loves, and is prepared to accept another husband when the candidate appears. She confesses to other love-affairs also, by the way, and defends her character sturdily on the ground that she

has a warm heart and it is the will of God that we should love each other. As she talks in her rather loud voice, sitting on her horse and addressing the whole cavalcade behind and in front of her, we imagine the decent reserve with which the knight and the prioress push on as far ahead of her as is polite, and the excited interest with which the monk and the friar and the other low characters crowd round, not to miss a word of this extraordinary self-revelation. The portrayal of her character is perhaps the most astounding literary achievement in the *Canterbury Tales*. It antedates Shakespeare's Falstaff by two centuries, and it sets the model of Browning's dramatic monologues over four hundred years before Browning began to write. Our most modern psychological novel can hardly expect to reveal more of human instincts and impulses, or throw more light on the subconscious than the Wife of Bath discloses in the great prologue to her story.

Next in brilliant contrast comes the parson, the country priest devoted to his parish. On him Chaucer spends his utmost eloquence of praise. There is no better portrait of the pastor in any literature. This man, he says, did not look for promotion in the great cities, nor for an idle post in a cathedral, but he remained poor in order to visit the sick, and those in trouble.

> " . . . Cristes lore, and his Apostles twelve,
> He taughte, but first he folwed it himselfe."

With the parson was his brother, a ploughman, equally a saint though his work was with his hands. Into the portrait of these two men, both serving God with the simplicity of children, Chaucer put, consciously or unconsciously, the attitude of the Middle Ages towards honest work; the attitude which thrills us in the

carvings of the cathedrals, and moves us profoundly in the illuminations of old manuscripts. We feel that this society, so far as we have had our glimpse of it, rests on the knight and his son, on the parson and his brother the ploughman, rather than on the prosperous guild members, or the rich merchant, lawyer and householder.

There was also, says Chaucer, the bailiff and the miller, referred to before, the purchasing agent of a temple or college, a somnour—an officer who summoned delinquents before ecclesiastical courts, and the pardoner —a nondescript friar who sold pardons. These last two, of course, lived on graft, and are the least admirable of all the characters in the pilgrimage. Yet we must add to the list the host of the Tabard Inn, and the poet himself.

The range of Chaucer's genius as a story-teller can be illustrated by three or four of the stories told on the ride to Canterbury. The reve's tale, coarse and vulgar though it is, illustrates the immense vitality of the poet's humour, and his extraordinary sense of what is comic in human nature. The examples we shall discuss here are more subtle and more refined, but the total work of the poet ought to be studied if one wishes an adequate sense of his vast understanding of life.

The knight, as we observed, is a rather exquisite gentleman, slightly formal in manner and naturally preferring dignified stories. He has a taste for the pageantry of knighthood, for the elaborate ceremonies of the tournament and the judicial combat, which were already becoming old-fashioned. He was interested also in the psychology of love as it was formulated in his day by court poets in France and in England. This anatomizing of the tender passion, this discussion of

subtle problems in sentiment, was one of the beginnings of the modern psychological novel. Here we feel that the knight, in spite of his old-fashioned manner, is dealing with our own themes. As a man advanced in years he was also interested in the unconscious humour of youth, especially when it is serious and in love.

He tells the story of two friends, Arcite and Palamon, who were captured in war and were imprisoned for life. Arcite, looking one day from the prison window, sees the beautiful Emily, sister-in-law of their captor and foe, walking in the castle garden. His falling in love at sight is deliciously described. A few seconds later Palamon looks from the window and is similarly struck to the heart by this apparition of beauty. Arcite turns on him and accuses him of treachery in making love to his lady—Arcite having fallen in love with her only three minutes before. The two prisoners, with no apparent chance of ever getting out of jail, engage in bitter battle for possession of the lady. Emily of course is entirely unaware of the commotion she has caused.

In the course of time a powerful friend of Arcite manages to secure his freedom, and his captor lets him go on condition that he never sets foot in the country again. Each of the lovers thereupon considers his fate, asking himself whether he would rather be imprisoned for life with the daily possibility of looking at Emily through the window, or free, but with no chance of ever seeing her again. Palamon, behind the bars, decides that he has the best of it.

After some months of agonized freedom in his own country, Arcite determines to go back in disguise. His unrequited love has so ruined his health that little disguise is necessary, Chaucer says; he is only the shadow

of his former self. So he returns to his enemy's court, takes service with him, and as a reward for his diligence is advanced to such a position of trust that he is near Emily most of the time. Yet he feels his happiness is farther off than ever, since if he tells her who he is, he will certainly lose his life.

One day he is riding outside the city walls, meditating his grief in private, when he meets Palamon, who by luck has just escaped from prison. Palamon challenges him as a traitor and a spy. Since he is unarmed he can't make good the challenge, but Arcite, according to the best tradition of chivalry, agrees to meet him on the spot next day and furnish him with arms with which to fight a duel. While they are in the midst of battle, doing their best to kill each other in honour of this lady who is not yet aware of their affection, along comes their captor with his wife, the queen, Emily herself, and all the rest of the court. His first impulse is to execute both his enemies, but the ladies are so moved by this tender spectacle of extreme love that they persuade him to let the lovers fight it out in judicial combat, on condition that the victor or survivor is to get Emily. After due preparation the judicial combat is fought out and Arcite is the winner, but at the very moment of victory his horse slips and throws him, and he dies of his wounds. Thereupon, with an irony typical of Chaucer, Emily marries the survivor.

The reader is tempted to protest that this is not a very adequate way of choosing a husband, and that there is little justice in the story and much accident. If you read enough of Chaucer you learn to expect just this philosophy in his portrayal of life. He is fond of exhibiting with a quiet smile the various stages of

insanity in lovers, and the curious accidents and haphazard arrangements of their fate. Yet he is not cynical. In his smile there is extraordinary tenderness and a sense of the pathos of life. The old knight may be poking fun at his son, the amorous squire, but one suspects that he remembers the time when his own heart ached romantically.

One of the priests in attendance on the prioress tells what is perhaps the most famous of the *Canterbury Tales*—the fable of Chanticleer and the fox. It was an old theme when Chaucer reworked it, but no one before or after him has ever told it with such verve and humour. As it came to his hands it was a simple story of the cock who was flattered by the fox into singing. When he sang he had to shut his eyes, and when he shut his eyes the fox carried him off. When the fox in turn was filled with pride over his trick, the cock said, " If I were in your place, I certainly wouldn't let me go." " I certainly shan't," said the fox, but when he opened his mouth to pronounce the words, the cock flew up on the tree to safety.

On this bare framework Chaucer elaborated a comedy of human life. He describes the barnyard, and the cock with all his wives. He gives at length the conversation between this lordly creature and the favourite wife, Pertelote. Quite obviously Pertelote worships her husband, but she also notes certain limitations in his wisdom. Few dramas have rendered more deliciously the domestic relations of the clever wife and the self-satisfied husband. The cock, of course, is given, like Adam in *Paradise Lost*, to much lecturing. He has a bad dream in which he foresees danger from the fox. His wife says the cause of the dream is indigestion, and suggests simple remedies. The cock insists that the

dream is important, not for its cause, but for its meaning, and he cites many cases from classical literature to show that dreams of this sort have presaged danger and discomfort to great men. His wife listens, not deeply impressed. She still feels that a certain homely medical treatment would stop the dreaming and the snoring of her admirable spouse.

When Chanticleer meets the fox the conversation is splendidly dramatic. The fox remembers the remarkable crowing of the cock's father—the implication being that one could hardly expect such a gift to occur twice in the same family. The cock's father, according to the fox, always did his best singing with his eyes shut; it was part of his technique. And he stood on his tiptoes and stretched forth his neck. Of course when the cock tries to demonstrate that he has inherited the gift, he makes particular point of shutting his eyes, to his own undoing.

This story, and the spirit in which Chaucer tells it, illustrates a long tradition still vital in fiction. We think of it when we meet all the barnyard creatures in Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird*, or when we read Rostand's *Chanticleer*. We think of it in all homely comedies of life near the soil, whether in contemporary Irish literature, or German, or Oriental. In a way it is the typical expression of Chaucer's genius, which seems to be conditioned by that Dame Nature of whom he often speaks. Something of the sap which is in the trees, of the life force which is in the earth, of the strong savour which is in country sounds and scents, is in his work. When we have read enough of it we begin to think of ourselves and of all human beings as belonging to this stream of life; not too refined at its source, but capable of noble developments—yet however refined at

last, not to be dissociated from the vital forces which disclose themselves in the soil, in the sunlight, and in the vein of growing things.

The pardoner's tale, very short and powerful, is a little outside of Chaucer's usual manner. It lacks his sunshine and his humour, but instead it gives us stark tragedy. It is a story of three rascals drunk in a tavern. Their judgment has disappeared long ago with the bottles they have consumed, and their cloudy brains are annoyed by the tavern gossip of a pestilence which prevails in the countryside. One of them starts up and swears that this fellow Death, who seems to be carrying off the neighbours, is a villain. What needs to be done is to find him and cut his throat. The other two rascals, equally intoxicated, agree that to kill Death would be an errand of mercy, and all three go out to look for him. They have not gone far when they meet an old man, a figure magically portrayed; you feel that he is an actual old man, yet you suspect something mystic and metaphorical in him, as though he were perhaps a messenger from the other world. They treat him rather rudely, and the old man protests that age deserves more courtesy. He is so old, he says, that he walks on the ground knocking with a staff asking his Mother Earth to let him in; yet the death he desires is denied him. At the word death, the drunken three ask him where Death is; they too are looking for him. The old man replies that for them Death can be found under yonder oak. He walks on, and they run to the tree he pointed out. There they find a mass of gold on the ground, and when they have counted it as far as their muddled wits are serviceable, they realize they are made for life, provided they can get the treasure away. But as one of them says, if they take it in the open day they will be

stopped as thieves, and no explanation will be available as to how they found it. The leading rascal suggests that they draw lots, and that the one on whom the lot falls shall go to town and bring back bread and wine. Then they all can wait till night, and remove the treasure in secret.

While the youngest is off on this errand, the leader of the band says to his fellow, "Why shouldn't we enjoy this gold between ourselves?" The other replies that the third rascal has seen it and it is too late to hide it. "No," says the first, "when he comes back and bends over to put down the food he has brought, you stab him on your side and I'll stab him on mine."

The youngest, meanwhile, is wondering why he shouldn't enjoy the gold by himself, and the upshot of his meditations is that he brings back with him three bottles of wine, one marked for his own use, and the other two poisoned. While he is laying down his burden, his companions murder him, and as soon as they taste the wine they die of the poison.

In this story Chaucer lets the plot speak for itself. The characters are clearly enough indicated in what they say, but we are less interested in them than in the grim march of the events. Perhaps it is for this reason that the story seems less characteristic of the poet than the nun's priest's tale, or the reve's tale, or the knight's. It has its place in the total picture of experience, like the dark portrait of Death, a skeleton with his drum, which we see in the carvings of medieval cathedrals, or in the old illuminated manuscripts. But the Chaucer of whom the world is fond is the poet who imagined the Canterbury Pilgrims, this queer assemblage of people, all ostensibly on the same errand,

to confess their sins, yet with such different philosophies of goodness and badness—the poet who, looking on this spectacle, could see the comedy without becoming sardonic, and could help us to love human nature even while he taught us to smile at it.

III

MALORY'S LE MORTE D'ARTHUR

III

MALORY'S LE MORTE D'ARTHUR

When William Caxton, the great English printer, set the type for Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, he provided the famous book with a preface which is still the most illuminating introduction to it. At the end of the fifteenth century, printing was still so unusual an art and the printer felt his office so important, that any book which he took the pains to publish would, in his opinion, deserve a special comment. Caxton says that he has recently put out various histories, "as well of contemplation as of other historical and worldly acts of great conquerors and princes." His reason for bringing out now this great collection of stories about King Arthur is that many English gentlemen asked him if it was not time to print the history of the Holy Grail, and the exploits of the chief of the three Christian worthies. Caxton, in a large parenthesis, explains to the reader that of the famous nine worthies of history, three were pagans, three were Jews, and three were Christians. The pagans were Hector of Troy, Alexander the Great and Julius Cæsar. The three Jews were Joshua, David and Judas Maccabæus. The three Christians were King Arthur, Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon, and the greatest of these all was King Arthur.

Caxton says that he raised some doubts as to whether King Arthur had ever existed. Throughout the preface we feel that the great printer has a keen critical

sense, and much humour. The ease with which he is convinced by his friends that Arthur did exist suggests charm of character rather than credulity. He says his friends answered that it would be folly and blindness to doubt that King Arthur had lived, because in the first place anyone can see where he is buried in the Monastery of Glastonbury. And also there are books which mention him, and in Westminster Abbey there is a print of a seal which is said to be his; and at the castle of Dover there is a skull which is said to be Gawaine's; and at Winchester a table which is said to be the famous Round Table; and in another place Lancelot's sword, and other similar evidence. "All these things considered," concludes Caxton, "there can no man reasonably say but there was a king of this land named Arthur." Having allowed himself to be convinced, he accepted the manuscript of a certain Sir Thomas Malory, an elaborate account of King Arthur and of his chief knights, translated and paraphrased and "reduced into English." Who Sir Thomas Malory was we do not know. Excellent guesses have been made by competent scholars, but he still is in the fortunate position of having his book speak for him.

Caxton says the book, beginning with the birth of Arthur and ending with his death, includes much other matter, as indeed it does. It treats, he says, of noble acts, feats of arms, of chivalry, prowess, hardiness, humanity, love, courtesy, and very gentleness, with many wonderful histories and adventures. It is divided into twenty-one books, each one devoted to some central character or theme, a list of which he gives, but through all of them the same characters come and go—Arthur and Guinevere, Lancelot, Merlin,

Tristram, Iseult, Sir Bors, Sir Gawaine, and the others.

Like the good printer he was, Caxton felt that his art must justify itself in the improvement of mankind. He says, therefore, that he has printed the stories to the intent that noble men may see and learn the noble acts of chivalry, the gentle and virtuous deeds that some knights used in those days, by which they came to honour; and how they that were vicious were punished and oft put to shame and rebuke. Oft, but not always. The fact is that Sir Thomas Malory had gathered so much and so miscellaneous a group of stories round the central figure of Arthur that no one simple philosophy could explain all of them, and as Caxton goes on to describe in some detail the variety of plot and character, one sees the prospect of wide disagreement as to what is moral in the book and what isn't. "Herein may be seen noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue, and sin." But Caxton solves all critical problems by one general bit of good advice—the best solution of all questions of censorship in art. "Do after the good and leave the evil, and it shall bring you to good fame and renoun." He also gives us a hint that the events in this marvellous volume may not be strictly historical—there are too many dragons and too many magicians in it. It will be pleasant to read it, he says, but "for to give faith and believe that all is true that is contained herein, ye be at your liberty."

What we have here, then, is first of all a collection of great stories. The *Morte d'Arthur* is one of those priceless volumes in which, through the genius of one man, or through what seems a happy accident, the

best stories which have delighted the world for hundreds of years are at last, and just before it would be too late, gathered up and made available for posterity. If Malory had not brought together these Arthurian tales, it might have been difficult for Spenser to discover them; we might have had no *Faerie Queene*, and in the nineteenth century we might not have had Tennyson's *Idylls*. When we begin to read Malory, the initial pleasure for most of us is in recognizing the characters and the legends which succeeding writers took from him.

But the *Morte d'Arthur* is far more than a source book—it is itself a great story, and holds its high place in literature by its own peculiar merits. We miss some of its quality so long as we try to find in it merely a resemblance here and there to Spenser or to Tennyson, or to some other poet who has retold the legend of Arthur. If we judge Malory directly from his book, without these oblique comparisons, we shall probably notice that the writers he resembles most are those who have not borrowed from him. He may make us think, now and then, of Chaucer, and of the poet who wrote *Beowulf*—both of them his predecessors, of old English and Scottish ballads, of Doctor Johnson, even, or to take an example from our times, of Rudyard Kipling. That is, these stories about Arthur are told not as they were, we suspect, in the French originals, but with modifications dictated by a very English temperament—by a character which liked clear-cut events, downright talk and positive conduct, and which found satisfactions in a dramatic fight. For the mysticism of the Grail legend, for the romance of Lancelot's love or Tristram's, we must go elsewhere. It is a waste of time to read much of either into this

book. But we find here in perfection that child-like zest in events for their own sake which is present in folk tales, and in fairy tales, and in all the myths which have haunted the race's memory. Man likes his stories to be frankly a yarn. "Once upon a time," is a fair beginning, we think—and from that point on we want something to happen. Malory shared this average taste, and he had also that preference which we have called English for those happenings which are vigorous, physical, even brutal. In the *Morte d'Arthur* the knights are said to be gentle, but they hit hard, they habitually get hurt, and they are familiar with battle, murder and sudden death. We are amazed to notice what terrific scenes are reported without comment and without emotion. Sir Archade accused Sir Palamides of treason—to take one example—and of course Sir Palamides challenged him to mortal combat. They were urged not to fight till after dinner, so they dined first. Then they got on their horses, fully armed, and Lancelot and the queen and some others sat down to watch, as though it might be a tennis match. It may have been late in the afternoon before they began, but the fight was disappointingly short. The first time the horses ran at each other, Palamides lifted Archade on his spear over the horse's tail. Then he dismounted and drew his sword, but Archade couldn't get up, so Palamides cut his head off. Then, we are told, they all went in to supper.

The superficial impression of a first reading is that in this zest for incident Malory has little discrimination; one event is as good as another, and there is no effect of relief or emphasis. It is as though he were imitating the flatness of an old tapestry. Perhaps he was. Perhaps his readers once felt in the stories an emphasis

to which we are now unresponsive. One suspects something of the sort in the story of Tor, the son of King Pellinore. A poor man came to court one day, bringing with him a tall youth of eighteen, riding on a lean mare. It was the time of Arthur's marriage, and the rumour was that the happy monarch would grant any boon asked of him—unless it was unreasonable. So this poor man, a cowherd, asked him to make the tall youth a knight. I have thirteen sons, he said, and the others are all willing to work at anything I tell them, but this one is quite useless; he spends his time shooting and casting spears and watching gentlemen fight, and he wants to be a knight himself. The king, impressed with the boy's size, asked to see the other twelve, but they all looked like the poor man. So the king, in his good nature, knighted Tor, and then asked Merlin whether the new addition to the order would be a success. Merlin replied that the boy ought to be, since his father was not the cowherd but King Pellinore. The cowherd said he rather thought not, but when his wife was brought, she admitted the fact. I knew nothing about this, said the cowherd, but it may well be, for he doesn't resemble me in the slightest. The only person offended seems to have been the boy. Dishonour not my mother, he said to Merlin —a little late, since his mother had just confessed. But Merlin explained that the news was more for his honour than his hurt, since his father was a good man and a king. When Pellinore happened to arrive at court the next day, Arthur told him they had found a son of his, and Pellinore was greatly pleased. Perhaps the early readers of Malory could understand why this incident should give so much pleasure all round. For us, the apparent disregard of the moral situation and

of the psychology of the characters produces an effect of quaintness, if not of comedy.

This particular incident serves as a good illustration because throughout the book we come on stories of heroes whose birth is accounted for irregularly or mysteriously. A mystery surrounds the birth of Arthur, and magic is involved in the birth of Galahad. Many of the knights, if their origin is shadowed by no mystery, are at least descended from an ancestry which needs explaining. The medieval reader had theories about fortunate birth which we do not feel, and in this aspect of Malory's book we encounter an outworn point of view, and are reminded that the book is old. But even in such places an effect survives for us; an effect of human drama, or of light on human motives, or, as in the case of Tor, an incidental effect of quiet comedy. The modern reader will be wise if he worries little about the original intention of such passages, and accepts with gratitude the charming effect they now make on him.

When anyone writes a story he finds himself solving the plot in one of two ways, according to his temperament. Either the incidents will be resolved by other incidents, or else they will come to an end, as experience often does in life, without any special climax, but with a by-product of illumination and understanding. In the first kind of story it is our will which is aroused. We feel for the hero who is in danger, or who is about to be very happy, and we unconsciously desire to realize the escape or the happiness proposed by the plot. Primitive stories are largely of this kind, and the vast majority of the legends in the *Morte d'Arthur* are told in this manner, even though in the older versions from which Malory

drew them, they have rather the effect of illumination. This other kind of story, which does not appeal to the will-power, stimulates in us an understanding of life. It gives us insight into people, and at last into ourselves. Its end is not action, but clarification. In Malory there are a few episodes of this kind, but for the most part, the clarifying effect is illustrated incidentally by occasional passages indicating that Malory had the gift, but implying that he preferred the other sort of plot.

This differentiation between the two types of story perhaps clears up for us a vague feeling we get from the book—a feeling which I have just tried to describe by saying that Malory is essentially English. He belongs to the race which holds that conduct is three-fourths, or a little more, of life. And we get the impression that like Doctor Johnson he would say that the rules of human conduct are well understood by the normally intelligent, and nothing remains but to act them out. Malory's world has no subtleties in it. Its morality is not always ours, and in some places we wonder just what its standards were, but in no place do we suspect any very fine distinctions, nor any problem which could not be settled by the simplest sort of character. Later English poets, using the same material, have made it subtle once more as it was in several of the old versions which Malory "reduced into English." The point is worth labouring somewhat, for most readers coming on Malory after having read Tennyson instinctively try to find in the old book what they have loved in the modern poet. It is helpful, perhaps, to notice at once how often the stories are simply records of action, ending happily or disastrously without comment and without even a suggested

philosophy. Here and there we come also on the other kind of narrative, and observe the sudden clarification of character which lights up the bare sweep of the epic.

A typical incident is the fight between King Arthur and the giant. The giant was a very bad man and had conquered fifteen kings, whose beards he had shaved off and used in embroidering his coat. Also—we are not sure this is the greater crime—the giant is a cannibal. Arthur decides to rid the land of such a monster, and finds him on the crest of the hill, where he sat at supper gnawing a human limb, waited on by three fair captive ladies, who were roasting before the fire, under compulsion, of course, twelve young children, new-born, like young birds. Malory does not mind heaping up the gruesome details. King Arthur challenges the giant, calling him a glutton, which he certainly was. The glutton started up, and with a great club knocked the king's crown off. Thereupon King Arthur, reaching up as far as he could, wounded this immense creature, and the giant in desperation threw away the club, caught the king in his arms, and began crushing his ribs. In this mortal wrestling the two began to roll down the hill; says Malory, "they went weltering and wallowing" till they came to the edge of the sea at the bottom of the mountain. And every time Arthur came on top in these revolutions, he managed to stab the giant with his dagger. When they reached level ground they ceased to roll, and Arthur got up and saw that his enemy was dead. "This was the fiercest giant I ever met with," said Arthur, "except one on the Mount of Araby which I overcame, but this was greater and fiercer." As Malory tells the incident we have the proper melodramatic

concern for the king. When he survives the fight we are satisfied, and we take a final pleasure from the nonchalant tone in which he compares giants like a connoisseur. This is Malory's way of unfolding incidents with broad strokes, and with the solution which our own wills prompt.

One or two other stories might serve chiefly for contrast. When Meliagrance accused the queen of treason and Lancelot came to rescue her, the fight is told in unusual detail, and there is more in it of psychology and perhaps of incidental illumination. Meliagrance, according to Malory, was a desperate traitor, and knowing that Lancelot would oppose him on the fatal day, he set a trap for the great knight, and had him imprisoned in a dungeon from which he was not to get out until after the queen's cause was lost and she was burned at the stake. In the castle in which the dungeon was, a fair lady lost her heart to Lancelot, and visited him each day, asking him for his love. If he would love her, she said, she would release him in time for him to rescue the queen. Lancelot remained loyal to Guinevere, saying, though it was not his choice to be free, it was his duty to be true. On the very morning of the judicial combat the lady repented, and told Lancelot that if he would at least give her one kiss, she would release him. Lancelot says that by all the codes of honour with which he is familiar, one kiss does not count, so he will buy his freedom on those terms. He arrives on the field at the last moment, and naturally he comes with murder in his heart. At the first encounter with Meliagrance it is quite obvious that Sir Lancelot will win. Meliagrance, struck down, cries out for mercy, confessing that he was in the wrong. Lancelot was greatly disappointed at this result, for he

could not decline to yield the mercy asked for, yet he was determined to kill Meliagrance. And as he stood there perplexed, he noticed that the queen nodded to him as though she would say, "Kill him." So Lancelot asked Meliagrance to get up and fight again. Meliagrance declined. Lancelot then offered him a generous handicap; he would unarm his head, the left quarter of his body, and let his left hand be tied behind his back and then fight him. The offer seemed so good that Meliagrance accepted the offer, jumped to his feet and began the battle again on those terms. When he came on with his sword raised, Lancelot showed his bare head and left side defenceless, but as Meliagrance brought the sword down on him, he dodged the blow lightly and cut the rascal's head in two. Malory says there was nothing more to do but to bury him.

An incident in another key belongs to the story of Tristram and Iseult, and Kehydius, the brother of that other Iseult whom Tristram had married in Brittany. Tristram had married this Iseult out of gratitude, but he did not love her, and she was his wife only in name. Kehydius followed Tristram back to Cornwall, and when he saw the great Iseult, he fell in love with her, to the annoyance of Tristram. He wrote letters to her, secretly, and ballads, "of the most goodliest that were used in those days." Fair Iseult was not in love with him, but she was so sorry for his plight that unwisely she wrote him a letter "to comfort him withal." And one day when King Mark was playing chess in the garden under a window, Sir Tristram was in a room upstairs asking Iseult what the letters meant—unluckily they had come to his notice. Kehydius was there also, and though the interview started with rational explanations, it ended in an attempt by Tristram to kill his

rival, who saved himself by jumping out of the window, over the head of the king as he sat playing chess. When the king saw someone come hurling over his head he said, "Fellow, what art thou and what is the cause thou leapest out at that window?" "My lord the king," said Kehydius, "it fortuned me that I was asleep in the window above your head, and as I slept I slumbered, and so I fell down." And thus Sir Kehydius excused him. Here the point of the story seems to have been the profound sagacity of Sir Kehydius.

Here and there in the whole book one comes on phrases of the clarifying sort which bring up a picture of human nature easily recognizable as true to experience to-day. The modern reader prizes these occasional glimpses perhaps more than the long account of battles and tournaments, exciting though these latter often are. We like, for example, the description of the coming of Elaine to Arthur's court, and her encounter with Guinevere. This is the first Elaine, the mother of Galahad. Malory says that she went to the court in pursuit of her lover, who hated her for having ensnared him with magic. Guinevere, of course, knows who she is. The two women, says Malory, smiled at each other, "but nothing with hearts." We like the very human way in which Lancelot's conscience begins to trouble him for his sins. He begins to repent only when he becomes unlucky. He got into a very dangerous place and suddenly discovered himself deprived of horse and arms. When he saw that these were missing, says Malory, he knew that God must be displeased at him.

The one long passage in which insight into human nature takes the place of mere incident is in the closing account of Lancelot and Guinevere. Here Malory is

affected by the example of his French sources. He attends rather more to the psychology of his characters than is usual with him. Perhaps also the very moving story which he is telling arouses even his somewhat practical temperament to the sense of subtle tragedy. He reports that after Arthur died, Lancelot called his men together and said that his fighting was over, but he would ride by himself and seek his lady, Queen Guinevere. So he rode into Arthur's realm unattended, though Sir Bors warned him of danger. No man nor child should be with him when he met the queen. After a search of a week or more he came to a nunnery, and Queen Guinevere, as she walked in the cloister, recognized him. She fainted at the sight, and explained to the ladies and gentlewomen who came to her aid that that knight yonder had brought this sudden weakness on her. Then with Sir Lancelot standing before her she said, " Through this man and me hath all this war been wrought, and the death of the most noblest knight in the world, and through our love was my most noble lord slain." Therefore, she goes on to say, she is resolved to save her soul in prayer and meditation, hoping even after a life of sin to have a sight of the blessed face of God. All that she asked of Sir Lancelot was to promise that he would never more come into her presence.

So far we might think that Guinevere has simply repented of her sins, and wishes to dismiss Lancelot, but the drama begins in her next words. She urges him for all the love that ever was between them to go back to his own kingdom and protect it from war and harm, and especially, she tells him, to find a wife there and live with her in joy and bliss. If he so desires he might pray for the queen, that God might help her to

repent. Out of all this speech Lancelot, of course, seizes on the one stinging remark. "Do you really mean," he asks, "that you want me to go back to my country and there marry somebody? You know perfectly I'll never do that. On the contrary, if you have decided to undertake this religious life, I will do so too, and my prayers will be especially for you." Guinevere replies with some of the old coquetry, "If thou wilt do so, hold thy promise, but I may never believe but that thou wilt turn to the world again." Lancelot is somewhat exasperated at this in the presence of the nuns, but with self-control he bids her talk as she likes, since she knows in her heart that he loved her and her alone. He calls God to witness that in her he has had his earthly joy, and if she had been so disposed, he would have taken her into his own realm to be his queen. Since her will is otherwise, he will be a hermit. Therefore he will leave her, but he asks for just one kiss before he goes. The queen declines, but it is clear enough that she loves him, and when he is gone she falls in a faint. Later he hears the sad news that she is dying, and starts with several brother monks to her death-bed, but we are told that her last breath was a prayer that she might never have power to see Lancelot again with her earthly eyes. Evidently she did not trust her own good resolutions if she should meet him again.

Here Malory treats the characters in that human way which we like to call modern, but which is universal and, so far as art is concerned, immortal. If I seem to say that he does this rarely, I mean only that his genius was for that other kind of narrative in which action is the chief interest. Aristotle said long ago, and we have no reason to differ with him now,

that a play or story can be good, even without character portrayal, if it has a plot; but without plot, there can be no good story, not even though the characters are closely studied. Malory has the genius for incidents, a rarer genius perhaps than the ability merely to make a plot. He makes us feel the vitality of events, as though life were enormously interesting to us, and anything that happened were worth noticing. What he could do in this other realm of human nature he shows in the parting of Lancelot and Guinevere.

The *Morte d'Arthur* is full of marvellous episodes, magic, necromancy, special revelations from Heaven. This material Malory inherits from his sources, but we suspect that he had not the temperament to make much of it. Merlin appears in several places, but not in an important rôle. The mystic sage to whom Tennyson restored a certain significance is in Malory not much more important than Dame Brisen of the other necromances. Malory's inability to handle this sort of material shows itself chiefly, of course, in his account of Galahad. He gives the episode of Galahad's birth with full attention to the supernatural elements in it, but with no great zest for what he is saying. When Elaine goes to the court and with Dame Brisen's aid lures Lancelot once more, and when Guinevere finds out this involuntary faithlessness of her lover and quarrels with Elaine, we feel that Malory is much more interested himself—certainly he tells the episodes with greater vividness for us. His best use of supernatural material was probably in the account of the coming and the passing of Arthur, which had never been told in English. The wonderful story of King Uther Pendragon shows Merlin in his power, and portrays the solid life of the old warfare and the old romance

with a certain abandon and vigour not often matched in literature. At the other end of the book the character of Arthur in his old age seems to us perhaps inglorious if we go back to it from Tennyson. But it is consistent, and at the very end superb. According to Malory, Arthur did not greatly love Guinevere; at least not at the close of his life. Before he had married her, Merlin had warned him in vain that she would love Lancelot instead. When the Round Table was broken up by Lancelot's treachery, it was for the loss of his friend rather than of his queen that Arthur felt the deepest regret, and he condemned Guinevere to be burned at the stake. Lancelot rescued Guinevere, of course. In the fight round the place of execution Lancelot killed some of his own friends, especially the brothers of Sir Gawaine. They were in the crowd unarmed, and in the confusion he did not notice whom he was striking. It is this accidental killing of some men who had been his friends which brings on the war with King Arthur. The loss of Guinevere would hardly have been enough to make trouble, for we have reason to think the king knew of her deception long before, and had decided to put up with it. In one of the last chapters we are told that Lancelot and King Arthur talked it over. Arthur and Gawaine were besieging him in his castle. The king invited Lancelot to come out and fight him, man to man, but Lancelot declined to raise his hand personally against his king. "Fie upon thy fair language," said the king, "for I am thy mortal foe. Thou hast slain my good knights." He adds also as a second item that Lancelot has carried off the queen. Lancelot immediately defends himself as to the murder of the knights, admitting his fault and his repentance. As for Queen Guinevere, his answer is a curious one,

that there is no knight in the world, leaving the king aside for the moment, who would dare make good that charge against him in judicial combat. He goes on to better argument when he reminds the king of the number of times Arthur had been ready to burn Guinevere at the stake—a curious record on the part of the devoted husband. Lancelot admits that he has loved the queen more than that. The rest of the conversation degenerates into recrimination, and challenge, and insult, in the way of the old battle stories, but enough has been quoted to show where the emphasis lay in the mind of King Arthur. He was interested in his knights and his Round Table, and Queen Guinevere was not a matter of great concern.

At the end of the story Arthur is wounded in battle, and Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere carry him from the field. Tennyson has taken this splendid episode as the basis for his *Passing of Arthur*, but not even his glorious poem is finer than Malory's account. For once mysticism and incident are blended, and we listen to the convincing story of Sir Bedivere ordered to throw away Excalibur in the sea, and hesitating to lose such a priceless weapon. We see by the water side the little barge with many fair ladies in it, and among them a queen, and we watch the knight and the lady lifting the dying Arthur into the barge. Sir Bedivere's cry has lost no truth, no poignancy with the centuries: "Ah, my lord Arthur, what shall become of me, now ye go from me and leave me here alone among mine enemies?" "Comfort thyself," said the king, "and do as well as thou mayest, for in me is no trust for to trust in; for I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wound: and if thou hear never more of me, pray for my soul."

Malory tells the story of Lancelot and Arthur at full length. He gives the same elaborate attention to the adventures of Tristram and Iseult. The part of this famous story which interests the modern reader most is the beginning, a section of Tristram's life usually omitted from later versions, but essential to an understanding of the quarrel between King Mark and the young hero. Here Malory is following old sources rather closely. King Mark was troubled by the tyranny of the Irish monarch who levied a heavy tax on the Cornish realm. Tristram grew up to be such a powerful champion that he undertook to fight out the question of the tax in a duel with Sir Marhaus. He wounded Marhaus so severely, that, though the Irish warrior managed to get home, he died with a piece of Tristram's sword blade in his brain. Tristram himself was wounded by the poison arms of Sir Marhaus, and sooner or later realized that if ever he was to be cured he must go to the people who invented the poison. He therefore went in disguise to the land of his enemies, and was there cured by the young Iseult and her mother, relatives of the champion he had murdered. Before he left for Cornwall, however, they discovered that the fragment of steel which they had found in Marhaus's skull fitted the broken place in Tristram's sword, and if certain impulses of hospitality had not intervened, together with an incipient love for Tristram on the part of Iseult, he never would have got away. When he left, therefore, he understood that his life would not be worth much if ever he set foot in Ireland again.

On his return King Mark was grateful to him, but later on the two men, uncle and nephew, fell in love with the same woman, and the lady preferred Tristram.

King's Mark's jealousy prompted him to murderous intrigue. When an official marriage was arranged between him and Iseult, he insisted that Tristram, unless he wished to confess himself a coward, should go to Ireland and bring Iseult to him. Tristram undertook the journey realizing that his uncle expected something evil to happen to him. This background of rivalry and hate explains somewhat the ease with which Tristram appropriated his uncle's bride, and in the incidental account of it Malory supplies us once more with brilliant insight into human nature. The story of Balin and Balan, the story of Gareth and Lynett, and other stories familiar in Tennyson, are also recounted at length. What Malory stands for, however, in English literature is chiefly his account of Arthur and Guinevere, of Lancelot and Galahad, of Tristram and Iseult. And the peculiarity of the account is the dramatic vigour of the incidents, as against the psychological interpretation which is the charm of most other versions.

IV
THE FAERIE QUEENE

IV

THE FAERIE QUEENE

We are accustomed to say that all masterpieces in art are modern, in the sense that what is immortal is always contemporary. *The Faerie Queene*, however, is one of those achievements which we call ultra-modern. It is one of the greatest of poems; it has made an appeal to every decade of English readers in the last three centuries and more, and it probably has its widest audience at this very moment in Europe and America; but it seems, in some ways, ahead of the times. If it were written to-day, we should say it was futuristic. It is the one outstanding masterpiece in English poetry which tries consciously to invent new forms of language, new ways of telling a story, new impressions of life itself.

When work of this experimental kind appears in painting or in any art, the average reader has the impulse to condemn the artist. We hasten to say that if he had really mastered his craft and were at home with the best that had been done in it, he wouldn't have gone afield for bizarre effects. But the fact is that the poet or painter who becomes deliberately experimental is usually not ignorant of the past: rather, he is too much aware of it. He perhaps is overcome by the realization of his heritage: since there are all these perfect things in the world, he argues, why should anyone waste his hour imitating them? Why not, by taking thought,

do something quite fresh? The very greatest artists seem not to have argued this way, probably because the energy of thought which secured their success prevented them from a dangerous modesty in the presence of their predecessors. In a few cases a sound ignorance of what had already been accomplished may have let the happy genius go boldly to his natural task. Shakespeare followed Edmund Spenser by only a decade, and he seems to have found in the world's literature up to his time nothing to discourage him. But then we are not sure how much of it he knew.

Spenser was a different sort of person. He apparently read most of the books available in his country in his day. He spent seven years at the university, and as far as he could he maintained an intimate friendship with learned men. It is customary to refer to him as one of England's four scholar-poets, the other three being Milton, Gray and Tennyson. From his early poems, in the *Shepherd's Calendar*, we know he thought the heyday of English poetry was over, and he despaired of equalling, or of seeing anyone else equal, Chaucer, already two centuries in his grave. From the few precious letters he wrote to Gabriel Harvey, his erudite friend at Cambridge, we know he thought the time had arrived for bold experiment, if English literature was to make further progress, but Harvey had no creative instinct, and the experiment into which he temporarily lured the young Spenser was an attempt to write English verse as though it were Latin. Odd as the idea was, and desperately dull as the results proved, they two were not alone in fearing—just before Shakespeare began to produce—that English verse was worn out, and could be saved only by a transfusion of classical prosody. Most of what Spenser wrote under the spell of this

fantastic theory is fortunately lost, but the knowledge that he went through such a stage helps us to understand the æsthetic theories implied in *The Faerie Queene*. There the great poet gets the better of the antiquary, but the consciousness of the past drives him to strange if lovely inventions. Most artists would be satisfied if their work were distinguished merely by excellence—by being better than anything else of its kind. In Spenser's masterpiece we feel at once the poet's resolve to invent a new kind. The wonder is that with such an intention he did produce something unique and something altogether beautiful.

It must be admitted at the outset that if we can understand the poem to-day, we have Sir Walter Raleigh to thank, rather than Edmund Spenser. Only half of the work was finished; there were to be twelve books, of which Spenser published the first three in 1590, and the same revised, with three more, in 1596. Yet the beginning of the long story, upon which depended any understanding of the plot, was not to be told until the twelfth book! The poet had some notion that he could hold us in suspense. Moreover, the hero of the book, the ideal gentleman, was to be presented to us part by part, as it were, and we were to add the parts together in imagination until the character was complete. In each book one of the twelve virtues of the gentleman in private life was to be illustrated—one-twelfth of a man; yet for fear the reader might lose his bearings, in each book Prince Arthur was to appear, representing a total man. The distinction for the average reader has always proved very theoretical—St. George in the first book may represent only Holiness, but he strikes us as no less complete in character than Prince Arthur, who is all the virtues.

In other words, if we had to depend on nothing but the poem, in its unfinished state, we might begin with the famous

"A gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,"

and read to the end, without learning what it was all about. We should come on glorious episodes, beautiful pictures, enchanting characters, but as to the plot we should be in the dark. Of course Spenser could protest that his skill as plot-maker should not be weighed before we have read that important twelfth book, in which this futuristic method of story-telling would be suddenly clear. But like many another ultra-modern in art, he made little allowance for the normal mental processes of his neighbours, and he asked the world to read the first half of his poem before the essential end was available. All that saved the day was a letter to Sir Walter Raleigh which we now prefix to all editions of the poem, but which Spenser printed as an afterthought, at the back of his 1590 volume.

Raleigh, fellow-poet and fellow-exile for the moment, visited Spenser in his Irish home in 1589, and they did what poets always want to do, they read their most recent verses. Spenser left us an idealized account of the meeting in *Colin Clout's Come Home Again*, but from the first lines of the invaluable letter we can imagine what happened. No doubt the guest read to start with—Spenser was the most courteous of men, and since Raleigh's gift was for lyrics of a moderate length, it cannot have taken him long to exhibit his poems. Then Spenser brought out the ponderous manuscript of his first three books. We'd like to know what portions he read. In any event, Raleigh advised him, we are told, to return to England and publish the poem,

and he also advised him, we gather, to explain to the reader what it was all about. " I have thought good," says the letter, " as well for avoyding gealous opinions and misconstructions, as also for your better light in reading thereof, being so by you commanded, to discover unto you the general intention and meaning." Perhaps Raleigh had urged the advantage of telling a story in the natural order, not backwards, for Spenser defends himself as to this point. " Because the beginning of the whole worke seemeth abrupt, and as depending upon other antecedents, it needs that ye know the occasion of these three knights severall adventures. For the methode of a Poet historical is not such as that of an Historiographer. For an Historiographer discourseth of affayres orderly as they were donne, accounting as well the times as the actions; but a Poet thrusteth into the middest, even where it most concerneth him, and there recoursing to the thinges forepaste, and divining of things to come, maketh a pleasing Analysis of all.

" The beginning therefore of my history, if it were to be told by an Historiographer, should be the twelfth booke, which is the last; where I devise that the Faery Queene kept her Annual feaste xii dayes; upon which xii severall dayes, the occasions of the xii severall adventures hapned, which, being undertaken by xii several knights, are in these xii bookes severally handled and discoursed." Certainly the reiteration in this sentence suggests that the poet was sensitive to Raleigh's criticism. " Is that plain enough," he seems to ask, " even for you ? "

The letter makes the poem intelligible, but alas, much of the letter is not clear. The truth is that Spenser's method in the poem was not one to encourage

precision in his letter-writing; perhaps after completing the thirty-six cantos of the three books, he had lost the faculty to make an exact statement. He had become an impressionist, and he relied not on the clear line of the older drawing, but on a new science of suggestion. Without having the word, he had become a psychologist. The unity of his narrative is not in the events he recounted, but in the harmonious effect they make upon the reader; the truth of the pictures he paints was not in the proportions nor in the respect he paid to actual life, but in the conviction they might carry to the reader's soul.

The opening stanzas of the poem illustrate the method. He shows us a little procession, the Red Cross knight on his charger, followed by Una on the "lowly Asse," and after her a dwarf, carrying her baggage. It is such a picture as you might find in an old tapestry, or in an illuminated page of old vellum—the majesty of the champion, the beauty of the lady, and then the homely face of the dwarf, doing the menial work. If it were really a tapestry, we should stand first in admiration before the figure of the knight, drawn in full detail, but at last we should exclaim, "Oh, look at the poor dwarf!" and we should catch the ironic comedy of life. The lady, as she rode, was leading a lamb by a piece of string.

"And by her, in a line, a milke white lamb she lad."

Those small stiff legs must have twinkled, to keep up with the horse and the ass. In fact, we must not inquire too closely into the speed at which the knight "pricked," or spurred, if the dwarf and the lamb remained with the expedition. We are expected to visualize the picture, and if we do, we exclaim again, "Just see the lamb

twinkling along there!" But after we have received our immediate impression of the lamb as of the dwarf, they both disappear. The dwarf does in the end return to the story when he informs Una that the Red Cross knight is imprisoned in the giant's castle, but the lamb is never mentioned again. The same method is implied in the third book where we are told that Britomart is accompanied on her quest by her old nurse, Glauce. Britomart has been trained to wear armour and to use sword and spear like a man, and no doubt she managed it very well. But the old nurse who volunteers as her squire has had no such training, and there is some danger that the story may become ridiculous if we see the ancient lady mounted on a fiery steed. Spenser avoids danger by dropping Glauce from the story without a syllable of explanation.

The next characteristic we ought to notice in his ingenious method is the ignoring of geography and chronology. Perhaps because he was asking us to consider one-twelfth of a character in each book, and finally to add up the twelfths into a complete man, he tries to represent his allegory in a world of the imagination in which there is no place and no time. The reader soon notices the absence of a horizon in the landscape. In fact, the persons are presented to him under a sort of spotlight of his immediate attention without much reference to any other background, so that any attempt to make an itinerary of these pilgrims or champions is vain. They really started from nowhere and reached nowhere; they are moved about in an imaginative vacuum. The lack of chronology in the poem is even easier to note. Spenser uses what we might call psychological time; when his characters are fortunate and happy, time goes very fast with them; they remain

in their happiness only an hour or so, or a day. But when they are unfortunate, imprisoned perhaps, or on a sick bed, time goes slowly, and we are told they were there for months. A simple way to check this statement is to go through the first book and make as accurate an account as possible of the days from the starting out to the meeting of the Red Cross knight with Guyon at the beginning of the second book. Guyon tells his adventures to St. George, and though, according to Spenser's letter, Guyon left the court of the Faerie Queene the day after the Red Cross knight set out, their chronology already shows a difference of several months.

It would now be clear that no ordinary criticism of the accuracy of Spenser's letter to Raleigh is justified. The poet has developed a way of being inconsistent for his own purposes, and the reader ought to enjoy him as he would enjoy an impressionistic picture, not by microscopic scrutiny of details, but by turning his inward eye upon the total impression the picture makes. Otherwise we should have to ask many difficult questions of the poem itself as we move along. When Prince Arthur, for example, has rescued the Red Cross knight in Book I, he tells his own adventures. It seems that he had been visited in a dream by the Faerie Queene, who in the allegory represents Glory, and ever since he has been trying to find her court. According to the plot, the Red Cross knight has just come from the Faerie Queene's court, and the least he could do, one might say, would be to tell Arthur where to find her. He does nothing of the kind, of course. If he did, the story would stop then and there so far as Prince Arthur is concerned. Once we have got into the spirit of Spenser's method, however, such questions do not arise

as we read. He made a shrewd guess as to the way our minds would behave.

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of his impressionistic method is his use of language. He had a profound admiration for Chaucer, whom he called "the well of English undefiled," but it was probably his fear that the English of his own time would degenerate into a vulgar dialect that induced him to invent a language of his own, founded, it seems, on his conception of Middle English. At first sight *The Faerie Queene* appears to be written in antiquarian words. That impression was stronger in the first edition than in the volume of 1596, in which Spenser made some changes in his new language. As we now have the poem, the reader needs nothing but courage to understand the meaning. The language is strictly phonetic—that is, words spelled the same way are pronounced alike. It really makes no difference how they are pronounced so long as this similarity of sounds between similar spellings is preserved. Theoretically, a language so invented ought to be difficult, and the success of the speech in *The Faerie Queene* is nothing short of a miracle. No one ever spoke just that way, and yet any intelligent person who knows modern English can get on well guessing the meaning from the context, or still more from the feelings the poem suggests. So far does Spenser carry this singular experiment that in one or two places where he is hard put to it for a rhyme, he makes use of a word which has the right sound, but which does not mean at all what he intends us to understand—yet we understand his intention. The famous illustration occurs towards the end of the second book, in the Garden of Acrasia, where the knight hears a magic song counselling him to enjoy life. This song is a

paraphrase of Tasso. Even if we do not understand the general sentiment of the passage in *The Faerie Queene* in which it occurs, we might check the meaning by the Italian original. The song ends with the admonition to gather the rose while spring is still here —to gather the rose of love while we are young, and while our love may be happily returned. Quite obviously in such advice there is no suggestion that to love is wrong. Spenser ends the song, however:

> " Gather the rose of love whilest yet is time,
> Whilest loving thou may loved be with equal crime."

When you consider it, crime makes a fine sound at the end of the stanza, and the little shock we have at hearing such a word in such a place serves only to increase the effect of climax as we readjust the sound to the meaning we know it must have.

In a larger sense, Spenser applies the same method of language to the subject of the poem. He tells us that the first book is about holiness, the second about temperance, the third about chastity; the other three are about friendship, justice and courtesy. If we start reading under the supposition that these words have their usual meaning, we are soon confused. Spenser expects us rather to get the general sense of each book and to understand from that the significance of the virtue he is talking about. Holiness, for example, seems to be not entirely a religious virtue. To be sure, much religious sentiment clings to it, but it seems to be rather a state of mind which secular man, as well as priest and saint, must cultivate if he is to find his way through this shadowed world. It is as though Spenser said to us in Book I, " Let us suppose for the moment that this life is an adventure in which the chief difficulty is

our blindness. We should be safe and successful if we could only see straight." The supposition interests us because we all know that from some points of view life does present just that problem. Spenser's way of stating it is to tell the story of Una and Duessa. Una is Truth, Duessa is Falsehood, but they look alike. The Red Cross knight starts out to serve Una, deserts her because he fears she is false, serves Duessa because she seems to be truth itself, and finally ends in the Dungeon of Error and Pride, from which he is rescued only by the grace of Heaven, incarnate in Prince Arthur. At the end of the first book the Red Cross knight has his eyes opened, temporarily at least, to the difference between truth and falsehood. They catch Duessa and strip away the mask she has worn, and the garments that provided her beauty. In her naked state she is nothing but the wretched hag, somewhat below the level of a decent beast. Yet even after this disclosure, and after the Red Cross knight has wedded Una, devoted himself once for all, that is, to truth, we are told that he must go back and undertake other quests—since the problem of distinguishing truth from error never comes to an end.

What Spenser means by holiness, then, is the virtue of clear vision, not only as we might seek it in the contemplation of God, but as all of us need it in the pursuit of science, or in our daily affairs. We are so constituted that we think the sun goes round the earth —it seems so to our eyes—even though reason tries to convince us that the earth goes round the sun. Our eyes are so made that the stick in the pool of water continues to look bent, though we have learned to discount that appearance. No two of us see the same thing in the same way. When we deal with our fellows

we are ready, more or less, to practise Plato's wisdom that the soul affects the appearance of the body, and that a beautiful body, therefore, is the outward sign of a pure soul. The logic of the doctrine is that to be beautiful, we have only to be good. In this extreme form some of us hesitate to believe it, yet we all practise the general faith that character can be judged by appearance. But now and then we encounter serious disappointment—the appearance fails us. Sometimes we meet a deformed body and a horrible face—a modern Socrates, perhaps, or an Æsop—and on close acquaintance we find that this uncompromising outside contains a soul of complete beauty. What is the explanation? And sometimes the problem shows itself in a still more desperate form—we meet an outer appearance of the utmost beauty and discover underneath a depravity and wretchedness which ought to have wrecked that superficial shell. How can this paradox be explained? Spenser does not try to explain. He traces the question home and leaves it there. In some other poems of his he stated the paradox vigorously, and let us understand that for him there was no adequate explanation. The best that we can do in life is to proceed in general on the faith that the body and the face do indicate the character. Yet when we have done our best we shall pray for a clearer sight to distinguish more than we now can between truth and falsehood.

When we turn to Book II we must drop this supposition of our blindness and raise another question. We must now suppose that life is an experience in which clear sight is entirely possible. We can tell what is true and what is false, and if we are not entirely foolish, we shall choose only the true and the good. But now we find there is a great deal of good, and a great

deal of true, and we cannot have it all. In other words, of many admirable professions we can follow, probably, but one; of the many beauties in the world to whom we might lose our hearts, we must devote ourselves to one; of the many places in the world where it is good to live, we must make a selection. If we decline to do so, existence will be for us a fretful and a distracting fever, and we must admit that this fever is a natural temptation when the love of life gets hold of us. The virtue that we have to acquire in order to choose and to be loyal to our choice, Spenser calls temperance. To some extent it is the self-denying virtue, since it helps us to give up one charming possibility of life in order to enjoy another. But the purpose of it, after all, is a richer enjoyment of life. Therefore, it counsels us not only to live deeply in the direction which it is right for us to follow, but also to think kindly of the careers we have rejected. It would not be temperate of us, that is, to call the choice we have given up, sour grapes.

If we remember that the object of temperance in Spenser's idea is to increase the richness of experience, we understand at once why he condemns indolence and sleep. The Idle Lake, as he describes it, is surely innocent enough in a way; the knight who listens to the beautiful song of Mirth, as she ferries him across to the Enchanted Island, is lured by no base passions, yet the total adventure is wrong because it is a retirement from life, a lotus sleep.

And since the object of temperance also is to make us think well of good opportunities, even when they are not our own, we ought not to be surprised that the Goddess Acrasia, or Intemperance, when she is discovered in her bower of bliss, is immensely beautiful.

Some critics have hastily complained that Spenser here forgets the moral purpose of his story. They say that intemperance ought to be represented like falsehood —as a wretched hag, and that students, especially the young, should be protected from reading any picture so alluring as that of the goddess naked in her bower, the very paragon of loveliness and delight. But to make this complaint is to confess that we have missed the point. Acrasia *is* beautiful, the sin of her lovers is only that her beauty was not for them—they had other business in the world at the moment. Of course, if she had not been beautiful there would have been no temptation to pass the hours with her, and if life were not really attractive in many directions we should have no temptation to scatter our forces and dissipate our energies.

The first two books are complementary, one showing the problem of life in the cloudiness of our vision, and in the slowness of our intelligence, the other showing the problem of character after we have found out which things are right and must make our choice of several good careers. The third book is the most startling in the poem. Any Elizabethan reader, seeing the word chastity at the beginning of it, would expect a praise of that virtue which Queen Elizabeth was proud to illustrate, which the Middle Ages had especially stressed. From our modern point of view that old ideal is not always understood. In one form it was the retirement of noble souls from the temptations of an unworthy existence. The monks and the nuns who took vows of celibacy and solitude, may have done so in the conviction that the body and all its impulses were in the soul, as Shakespeare called them, a " muddy vesture of decay." This ideal of medieval chastity in

its narrower aspect of celibacy, perhaps fails to impress us now—we think it somewhat timid, but no doubt most of the medieval saints who chose celibacy rather than the domestic life did so for the very same reason for which man and woman still choose it, without taking on vows or a uniform or a habit; that is, they choose it in order to be free for important and necessary work. Women who give up the possibility of a home to do invaluable service in education or in other fields, are the modern equivalent of those medieval saints who thought of chastity as the supreme virtue of a devoted soul—devoted, that is, to a supreme ideal. When Elizabeth liked to hear herself called "the virgin queen," she was finding satisfaction in the recognition on the part of her subjects that she had sacrificed her private happiness in order to serve them.

Queen Elizabeth gave Spenser a pension in return for the dedication of *The Faerie Queene* to her, but perhaps if she had read as far as Book III she would have given him nothing. There it is quite obvious that he has a new idea of chastity. He still speaks kindly of the devoted celibate, but what kindles his enthusiasm is a dream of purity which is in no conflict with nature or with natural impulses. The champion of his book is a girl, Britomart, who goes out on no quest of rescue, though incidentally she is helpful to the people she meets, but the object of her journey is to find a husband. She has picked him out and is looking for him, but he does not yet know of her existence or that he has been selected for this honour. Writers in our own time have accustomed us to the idea that women do the wooing rather more than men, but Spenser states the idea in a noble way without cheap humour at woman's expense. His chastity is the

creative instinct in man or woman, most of all in woman, who feels the urge to find a father for her children, and to become the ancestress of noble descendants.

Before we discuss Britomart a little further we ought to notice the interesting attitude towards nature which Spenser everywhere implies, and most of all in this third book. The Middle Ages had taught in general that all natural impulses were probably wrong, ever since the fall of man. The pursuit of virtue, therefore, was a warfare against those impulses, and perhaps the highest virtue could be attained when those impulses were most thoroughly denied or repressed. In our modern thought we are still children of Rousseau, who expressed for us the amiable eighteenth century theory, that all our natural impulses were good and that any fault or mistake we are guilty of must be blamed upon an improper education. If, in the Middle Ages, the passion of love was often condemned theoretically, because it was to such a large degree a natural passion, in the romantic period a love-affair was considered itself a virtue just for the reason that nature entices men and women into each other's arms.

Spenser, however, took a view which the Greeks would have approved, and which we now are beginning to like—he considered that the impulses of nature were neither good nor bad; that it was neither a virtue nor a fault necessarily to fall in love, or to carry out any other natural impulse. Nature, in all its forms, to him was a neutral energy like gravitation. The moral question rose only when we decided to use this energy and when we made of it something good or something bad. This philosophy he chose to dramatize in the story of Belphœbe and Amoretta. It is a little

parable of generation, inserted in a rather startling way in this praise of chastity. When we have recovered from our surprise, we realize that chastity to Spenser is the most creative of all virtues. Belphœbe was a huntress, a follower of Diana, impervious to love and sentiment. Amoretta is the lady-love of Scudamour, passionate in her nature and rather tragic in the experience of her heart. Spenser says that they were not only sisters, but twins. Their mother was not married, and her nature was as much a blank as the poet can persuade us to believe. He wants us to think of her as a neutral source out of which these two lives came. He says that she bathed in the forest pool one day and lay down to sleep on the lawn. There, by a miracle of light, she became the mother of these two infants, whose father was the sun. The two children were born as miraculously as they were conceived, and we are asked, therefore, to believe that they began life with no inheritance of passion, with nothing but abstract impulses.

Now it happened that Diana was bathing in the forest the very day these twins were born. Venus suddenly appeared at the edge of the pool and asked Diana if she had seen anything of Cupid, who had got lost. Diana drew her draperies around her and invited Venus to move on. The queen of the huntresses was nothing if not frank to the goddess of love. She told her she was no fit associate for a respectable goddess. For the first time in mythical society, Venus stood her ground and answered back. Her argument in her defence was so powerful that Diana regretted her insulting remarks, and was ready to admit that in this broad world there was a place for love as well as a place for denial of it. They sealed the reconciliation

by going together to look for Cupid, and on the way they came on the new-born twins. Each goddess took one of the girls and brought her up. Belphœbe, chosen by Diana, became like her a huntress, cold to passion and removed from life. Amoretta, brought up by Venus, became like her a great lover. The proposition is, therefore, proved somewhat mythically that it is education, the use we make of natural impulses, which determines their quality.

This fable forms the background against which the story of Britomart is told. She was the only child of a great king, who, rather disappointed that he had no son to inherit the kingdom, brought up his daughter as though she were a boy; taught her to ride, to manage arms, and almost persuaded her and himself that she was the son he had longed for. When she grew to be a young woman and took her place in the castle as the châtelaine, she happened to find one day a magic mirror in which she saw the face of a man, and lost her heart for ever to his appearance. It was in a mirror she saw him, that is, her ideal was largely the reflection of herself. When she is at the age when Nature will prompt her to fall in love, she falls in love with her own vision of perfection, and like the rest of us, she goes out to seek it. In other words, she will put the ideal on the most eligible object she can find, and make what reconciliation she can between them afterwards. Since she does not know who this man is, though in the mirror she did read the name Artegal, she and her nurse Glauce go to Merlin for information. Merlin tells her that she is to be the mother of a great line of heroes. Her happiness at the news makes her forget to ask just where Artegal can be found. When it is too late to get the information from Merlin, she

decides to put on her armour and mount her horse and go through the world disguised as a man until she finds her mate.

The subject of the remaining three books can be told briefly. In each case the reader must follow the same method—he must not decide what is meant by friendship, by justice, or by courtesy until he has read the books. Most of us consider friendship not a virtue, but a social relation in which we practise certain virtues such as loyalty and unselfishness. It is clear, however, that Spenser understood friendship itself to be a virtue. He thinks that if two people complement each other absolutely, so that they seem to share one soul in two bodies, it must be because their souls have reached a state of spiritual perfection. Harmony of this sort to his mind would be impossible if either soul were seriously damaged by wickedness or by frailty. It is clear that he looks upon friendship so defined as the highest state of human love. The passion which nature inspires in Britomart, or in any other young lover, is after all a temporary thing, a means to an end. Britomart meets Artegal at a tournament in Book IV. He cannot conquer her nor she him, but he strikes her helmet off accidentally and sees her face, and her beauty so unnerves his arm that he can fight no more. Her quest is therefore over and they become wedded souls, or as Spenser prefers to say, they become friends. In our ordinary speech, to say that two passionate lovers have become friends is to suggest that they are about to get a divorce. Obviously, before they can become friends in Spenser's sense, their passion must have reached such a consuming heat that petty meanness has been burned away, and their souls are united as one celestial flame.

The book of justice, in many respects the most powerful of the six, is also rather grim. Spenser, like other Elizabethans, had personal reasons for asking what justice is. He had seen the father of his friend, Sir Philip Sidney, disgraced in his political career because he had tried to deal mercifully with the natives in Ireland. The tempering of justice with mercy was, in that case, distressing. He had then seen his friend, Lord Grey of Wilton, disgraced politically because he had dealt out justice in Ireland with an iron hand. Spenser's conclusion is that in this world you must choose justice or mercy, but that if you choose mercy, you will be unjust; a singularly dark conclusion for so gentle a poet. He puts the case in one memorable episode—Artegal, having left his bride at home, was on a quest. He meets half a dozen brawny women dragging along the road a knight whose hands are tied and who has a halter round his neck. Artegal interferes and asks why they are hanging the knight. The women say that their queen, a strong Amazon in the near-by castle, conquered the knight in fair fight, and the penalty of defeat is hanging. The indignant Artegal makes them return with him to the castle, where he challenges Radigund. She comes out to fight, but asks him to agree as a gentleman in case of his defeat to be her obedient slave. He is so sure that he will not be defeated that he promises. He is about to conquer her when he knocks her helmet off, and inevitably thinks of Britomart. Radigund is not handsome but she is a woman, and he remembers that other episode, altogether beautiful. He cannot bring himself in that mood to kill a woman, and he decides to do what he persuades himself is a just thing—he mercifully lowers his sword and allows her to take him

captive. But the grim irony of his mercy is that those six brawny women then take out the first knight and promptly hang him.

The last book, of courtesy, is a study of manners and morals—a study of the etiquette which we have, most of us, been brought up to without realizing that it was invented in Elizabethan times or slightly earlier. To Spenser and his contemporaries the question was still fresh and new, how man should behave in society. What interests us in the book now is the purpose of all this courtesy. It is, he says, to provide us with fame. The originality of his idea here lies in the implication that those people are famous in the world who are memorable, who have some quality in themselves which the mind dwells on with satisfaction. Merit in itself is not enough for fame; a certain fine manner must set off the merit before fame can take hold.

The total impression of these six books with their strange names, their strange language, their strange narrative method, their lack of geography and chronology, is singularly human. Why it should be so, no one can say—it was Spenser's genius. We should not care to advise any young writer to hope for such a result again from such methods, but we continue to read the great poem—I think we read it more than ever to-day—for its immense understanding of our human problems, for the love of life it implies, and for the singular beauty of spirit through which it teaches us to look at mortal experiences. Spenser is sometimes called "puritan," but to use that word to describe his ardent and tender soul is to give it, in his own manner, a new meaning.

V

ROMEO AND JULIET

V

ROMEO AND JULIET

EVEN before Shakespeare increased its beauty and widened its appeal, the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet was, if not a classic, at least a popular story. The cruder versions of it suggested some resemblance to the best ancient and medieval love-legends—for example, to the story of Hero and Leander, of Pyramus and Thisbe, of Tristram and Iseult, perhaps also of Troilus and Cressida; and in the continual rehandling of the theme by French and Italian paraphrasers and translators, these reminiscences of long remembered tales developed into unmistakable symptoms of immortality. Shakespeare was dealing, therefore, with far richer material made ready to his hand when he meditated on Brooke's poem, or on other accounts of Romeo and Juliet, than when he studied Holinshed's record of Macbeth or Cinthio's dark tale of the Moor. Yet in no other version than Shakespeare's did this love-story enjoy a much larger audience, or appeal to a much later time, than that which read it first. Every known form of it, from Masuccio to Brooke, contained some passing note, some temporary emphasis, which clearly enough, as we can see now, narrowed and shortened its fame.

If it is curious that a tale of such vitality should have waited so long for an adequate rendering, it is still more extraordinary that in order to transfigure it into a world poem Shakespeare should have made so

few and such simple changes. In one sense, of course, his changes and additions were large and momentous, for at a stroke he expressed adequately for the race what it had long tried in vain to say. But in another sense the changes were slight. In fact, *Romeo and Juliet* illustrates better than some of his greater dramas the essentially corrective quality in Shakespeare's genius —the gift for setting an old story right, for adjusting it to the criticism of facts, rather than for contriving novelties and surprises. It might be argued that this play, though in subject less complex and in many ways less profound, is a happier instance than even *Hamlet* of his genius for revising the laboured inventions of other men into an obvious immortality; for Hamlet, even when clarified in Shakespeare's imagination, remains still a special case, arousing and baffling our curiosity, whereas the two lovers, as he drew them, illustrate a universal experience in a manner which, with all differences of time and of language, is still universally understood.

That a love-story already acceptable to the Continent in various forms for various reasons should be transmuted by English genius into a world poem, must seem extraordinary even when the genius happens to show itself in a Shakespeare. The English temper has often revised a well-known legend in order to accommodate it to English ideals, but the process has rarely seemed to the whole of Europe an improvement. Tennyson, for example, remoulded the Arthurian cycle into an adequate rendering of English taste in the mid-century, yet the Continent then, and most of us now, would not prefer his Arthur, his Lancelot or his Guinevere to the characters so named in medieval romance. Chaucer, indeed, departed frequently from his sources to get a

finer poetic justice, as when he rearranged certain details in *The Reve's Tale,* to save his audience from pitying the miller's daughter. Walter Scott, also, had a kind of cosmopolitan breeding which exercised itself usually in such tactfulness as all readers would approve, though the absence of it would have offended, perhaps, only the British public. But neither Scott nor Chaucer gave Europe a story of great passion, unless the *Bride of Lammermoor* be called such, and even this legend is a romance of sentiment rather than of passion. *Romeo and Juliet,* however, takes its place easily with the story of Helen and Paris, of Lancelot and Guinevere, of Tristram and Iseult, of Abélard and Héloïse. When we are praising Shakespeare, we observe that the scene is not really in Verona, nor are the lovers in any special sense Italian; we sometimes forget, however, that the scene is also not in London, nor are the lovers in any limited sense English. This universality could hardly be claimed for all the plays. To write discerningly of *Macbeth,* as Maeterlinck has done, or of *Lear* or *Hamlet,* implies in a European critic some special sympathy with the English genius, but to understand *Romeo and Juliet* is the common gift of lovers.

It is natural to ask by what changes, however slight, was the story made to fit a universal experience. It is natural to ask also whether something besides Shakespeare's genius did not contribute to the remarkable result; for if his genius alone had accomplished it, why is not *Hamlet* or *Lear* as germane to the Latin taste as *Romeo and Juliet,* or why is not *Romeo and Juliet* less intelligible to the northern mood? As he tells the story, it is far more simple than in the earlier versions; for this difference his dramatic instinct may entirely account. But the story is also far more

innocent, and the characters are more pure; and this difference makes of the play an essentially new drama, in spite of its far-descended plot, for the innocence of the lovers appeals to certain emotions which the Italian or French Romeo and Juliet could hardly have aroused, and the appeal to these emotions has proved as effective in Italy and France as in England and Germany. To put the whole matter in a phrase, the story before Shakespeare touched it was a tragedy which befell two young lovers; he made it the tragedy of young love.

We may see more clearly the direction in which Shakespeare simplified his plot if we first observe the contradiction which appears in all the great tragedies of love. In each of them the essence of the story is that the hero and heroine are doomed to love at the cost of whatever sacrifice, yet in circumstances which forbid their loving. Out of much experience of what is typical in passion, the race has chosen to remember chiefly that where the union of hearts seems most imperative, the barriers to it seem insurmountable.

If the form of this encounter between passion and its obstacles varies from story to story, we should expect as much, to parallel the changing definitions of love and of fate. The love of Paris and Helen was ascribed to the victorious goddess on Ida; the wrath of the other goddesses forbade their happiness. To be sure, Helen was married already, and so was Paris, but as Homer tells the legend the vows of wedlock were no great obstacle; it was the rising tide of Greek destiny, rather than the revenge of Menelaus, which overtook the lovers. Tristram and Iseult were bound by a tangible obligation, in the magic draught; and to the men who made the story Iseult's marriage with

King Mark seemed, without further interference from the gods, sufficient obstacle to her love for Tristram. Youth and beauty, in an age that could conceive of no causes more constraining, kindled in Abélard and Héloïse, in Lancelot and Guinevere, in Paolo and Francesca, the flame that will not be denied; the obstacle in each case was a vow of religion or of wedlock, an obligation of friendship or of kinship. So in Romeo and Juliet the fated love meets the fatal barriers, though time has altered the terms of the paradox. Something more than youth and beauty or the fury of passion drew them to their doom. Before Shakespeare told their history, men had learned a spiritual fineness in love; Dante and Petrarch, devoted to the memory of dead women, had conferred on the human passion a mood and a ritual that raised it to the dignity of a religion, so that after them any well nurtured lover, even in the midst of the Renaissance delight in the body, would hold as the best part of his ideal the marriage of true minds. In this harmony of soul Romeo and Juliet recognized their destiny. They loved at first sight, as we say; and though the philosopher rightly reminds us now that in times when women were rarely seen and ordinarily not to be spoken to, people fell in love at first sight since they must fall in love somehow, yet the poet made something universal of that circumstance—with true lovers there seems to be no wooing, for they are mated ere they are born. The feud also, which was to defeat Romeo and Juliet with implacable hate, had been prepared for them before their birth. Their destiny was one passion, the obstacle to it was another.

This constant opposing of desire and disappointment in the great love-stories has inevitably suggested some

relation between them, some migration of history or myth such as scholarship delights to trace. It is because of this conflict in all the stories that *Romeo and Juliet* has been thought to show kinship with certain of them—with the legend of Pyramus and Thisbe, for example, or of Hero and Leander, or of Tristram and Iseult. In all four instances, the lovers are separated; in each, the woman, finding the man dead or dying, kills herself. Yet the resemblances among the convincing tragedies of love probably spring from the disposition of love itself. It is not necessary to suppose that Shakespeare studied these old tales, or even glanced hastily at them, as we have done, to recall the motions and attitudes of human passion; from experience and from observation he would know that to believe their passion authentic and obligatory is always the way of man and maid, whether they explain their persuasion of fate by the will of a goddess, or by the working of a magic draught, or by a blessed recognition between affianced souls. That this world is not a hospitable place in which to realize the destinies of the heart, is naturally the second conviction of impatient love; the particular fate that speaks distinctly to lovers, society around them is always slow to hear. When the moral sense was crude, the highhanded suitor might well locate this social inhospitality in the protests of the lady's discarded husband, or in earlier and frankly buccaneering times he might assume an angry goddess, or several of them, to explain the husband's unreasonable sensitiveness. But ages nobler and more refined have discovered the world's unreadiness for love in the reluctance of unacquainted families to rush into each other's arms, even to the third and fourth cousin, with that abandon of enthusiasm which lovers think fitting.

This coldness of the families Shakespeare raised to the tragic menace of an ancient feud.

An ancient hatred, a destined love—upon this irreconcilable conflict the poet focuses all the distracted interests of the story he inherited, and this concentration brings about his simplicity. To fill the tragedy with meaning for all young lovers, he had only to emphasize the estrangement of Romeo and Juliet from their environment; he therefore rearranged his material so as to bring out clearly three contrasts—the contrast of love with hate, of youth with age, of courtesy with vulgarity. The contrast with hate has often been analysed, and it needs but a brief summary here. It shows itself in the old quarrel of the houses, so old that no one remembers how it began. The servants of the families fight in the streets till they become a public nuisance, yet the quarrel with them is mechanical. With Tybalt, however, it is quite conscious; the feud is stored up in him as pure venom, hate incarnate. As though to explain him, Shakespeare makes the Capulets the quarrelsome family, whose hot temper and wilfulness centre in this one unpleasant character. Juliet's sorrow for him is no deeper than kinship demands, and that her parents should think her to be grieving over his death is explicable only by their exaggerated clan loyalty. Yet though Shakespeare clarifies the story by distinguishing between the temper of the families, he is too observing to set up an absolute mechanical difference; he allows the Capulets, even Tybalt, a better side, a melting mood. To be sure, whether it is a servant or Tybalt himself, it is always a Capulet who begins the fight, whereas the Montagues, at least Romeo and Benvolio, are consistently for peace. Yet we too easily overlook the instances when the impulsive

Capulets take a generous course. The one glimpse we have of the gentler Tybalt is, unfortunately for him, where few readers find it—in a silence. When he encounters Romeo and challenges him to fight, angry because the Montague had dared to come uninvited to the Capulet banquet, the newly-married husband asks for his friendship instead of his hate, and Tybalt drops the quarrel. If Mercutio had not misunderstood Romeo's motive, and had not then provoked Tybalt on his own account, there might have been a chance of reconciliation. Tybalt's kindly moment, it should be noted, seems to be an invention of Shakespeare, one of his simple but important changes. In Brooke's poem Tybalt did not see Romeo at the banquet, and therefore had no cause to be angry with him, but challenged him merely for the sake of fighting, whereupon Romeo promptly slew him in self-defence. Shakespeare specifies also that it was old Capulet who first confessed himself wrong and asked forgiveness at the grave of his child. Yet with all these shadings of character, the poet managed to concentrate every degree of malevolence in an almost visible cloud of death, which shadows the story from beginning to end, and which is felt quite naturally in the dark metaphors of the dialogue. "My only love sprung from my only hate," says Juliet, when she learns who Romeo is. "Where be these enemies?" asks the prince ironically at the end of the play, when the two fathers look down at their dead children.

The estrangement of the children from their parents, which is suggested in the contrast between love and hate, is indicated sharply in the contrast between youth and age. The lovers are young, and in the story as Shakespeare tells it only the young can sympathize with them. It is probably far-fetched to think, with some readers,

that the poet deliberately sounded the theme of youth in his metaphors, as he had sounded the theme of hate; it was probably in order to express Romeo's character rather than his own comment that he often gave the youthful lover a presentiment of evil, a sense of approaching death, which would seem but the humour of love-melancholy did not the event give it tragic force. "The game was ne'er so fair, and I am done," he says, moping not for Juliet but for Rosaline. It is probably due to the exigencies of the plot rather than to any purpose of symbolism that the poet lays so many scenes at dawn or in the morning hours. We first hear of the sentimental Romeo as haunting the woods at dawn. It is in the morning that the first fight occurs. Romeo seeks Friar Laurence in his cell at dawn; at dawn he leaves Juliet, who is then told she must marry Paris; at dawn she is found apparently dead; at dawn she and Romeo and Paris are found in the tomb. Yet if these many sunrises are implicit in the story, it is otherwise clear that Shakespeare knew the dramatic importance of the youth of the lovers. "Wert thou as young as I," says Romeo to Friar Laurence, "then mightst thou speak." Shakespeare takes obvious pains to emphasize Juliet's youth by making her but fourteen years old, two years younger than she had been in earlier versions of the story; and he does more than lessen her years—he removes from her character every suggestion of experience with the world.

This morning-glamour in hero and heroine is set off by the age of their parents, age that has forgotten what love and youth are like. So violent has Shakespeare made the contrast, that the tale seems to be of grandparents and grandchildren. "Old Montague," as Capulet calls him, cannot guess what ails Romeo, nor

can Lady Montague, although the malady is too obvious to younger eyes for Benvolio not to hit it in his first question. Neither parent has the son's confidence. Yet here again, as in the other contrast, Shakespeare makes his general point clearer by distinguishing between the families. If the Montagues do not understand their son, at least they show for him a tender solicitude, which the Capulets never felt for Juliet. Lady Montague in particular loves deeply and fatally, as we should expect, if to love comes by inheritance. When she hears the details of the first street-fight, her involuntary exclamation is full of concern for Romeo's safety; and when he was exiled, her grief killed her. She died on the same night, Shakespeare tells us, perhaps at the same moment, as her son. If age had separated her from the world of his desires and his sufferings, she yet bore him a disinterested love, and neither she nor her husband hoped or planned except for his happiness. It is hard to say as much for the Capulets; their affection was worldly, and they were as aggressive in their worldliness as in their feud. Shakespeare makes Juliet's father so old that his best virtue is the patriarchal one of hospitality, and his wrath is petulant and senile. When he loses his temper, his wife reminds him none too politely that he had better call for a crutch than for a sword. We wonder if Juliet is not the child of a second marriage, for in his affectionate mood he says the earth has swallowed all his hopes but her, yet later in his wrath at her refusal to wed Paris he exclaims

> "Wife, we scarce thought us blest
> That God had lent us but this only child;
> But now I see this one is one too much,
> And that we have a curse in having her."

Did Lady Capulet, for mere social position, marry without love a man far older than herself? Certainly she is the least attractive person in the story, with fewer qualities to admire than even Tybalt. By her own account she is young, though we suspect she exaggerates her youth when trying to persuade Juliet to an early marriage; but whatever her years, her heart is more withered than her husband's. He at least had the impulse to spare his daughter's childhood for a time, and he urged Paris to win her affection, saying with unconscious irony

> "My will to her consent is but a part;
> An she agree, within her scope of choice
> Lies my consent."

The sequel shows, of course, that the old man never dreamed of her loving anyone of whom he did not approve. But though he failed to carry out his generous sentiment, he was capable of feeling it, whereas his wife was thoroughly selfish. Few women in Shakespeare have so hard a heart. She speaks casually, and hopefully, of a plan to poison Romeo. When she sees the lovers dead in the tomb, she says not a single word of regret for them, but in her conventional moralizing she reveals her egotism:

> "O me! This sight of death is as a bell,
> That warns my old age to a sepulchre."

As though to emphasize these master themes, these contrasts of love with hate, of youth with age, Shakespeare announces them together in one consecutive passage, in the scene of Capulet's feast. It is always unsafe to ascribe to deliberate intention in Shakespeare what may be only a coincidence, and it is not necessary to suppose that here the poet is conscious of all the irony

in his lines; but those lines would hardly have been written had he not imagined the story as in essence a conflict between love and its inhospitable environment, between the immediateness of youth and the forgetfulness of old age. Juliet's father, who represents Age, welcomes another Capulet to the feast, asks how long it is since they two were "in a mask," and is astounded to find it is thirty years; in other words, the dancing days of Juliet's father ended some sixteen years before she was born. Then follows the impassioned speech of Romeo, who in the double contrast represents Youth and Love; he has caught sight of Juliet, and his heart is lost. At once Tybalt speaks, the pursuing Hate—

> "This, by his voice, should be a Montague.
> Fetch me my rapier, boy."

The inhospitality of environment has the effect of setting Romeo and Juliet off by themselves, in a kind of loneliness. At first we meet them in their proper society, surrounded with friends and relatives; but as the story proceeds they are estranged from their world. It is this common estrangement that makes them appeal to us as one character, as devoted to a single tragic fate. In a world such as theirs, of which the strongest principle is family pride, to become strange to one's own people is disaster enough, whether or not other sufferings follow. Even if they had escaped successfully to Mantua, or to any place under heaven, their fate, so wrenched from its order, would have been tragic; so that it even seems a kind of saving from total wreck that, if they must die, they should die in the ancestral tomb, with the reconciled living and the unreconciled dead about them. Yet until that moment the effect of the story is to isolate them. They had each found a sharer of their confidence in place of the

disqualified parents, but the course of the story robs each of this comfort also. Romeo's adviser is Friar Laurence, who as a ghostly father serves partly to represent the church, but also, as a philosophical dreamer, more particularly to set up a contrast with the impetuous and unconsidering lover. The good man's way of solving life is to meditate upon it; his great antidote is patience—patience for young love, patience for Tybalt's insults, patience for exile. This spiritual panacea had yielded its fascination while Rosaline was the adored; to brood and speculate upon his passion and her coldness had been not unpleasant to Romeo then. In the new love for Juliet, he at first pursued his habit of consulting Friar Laurence; perhaps some share in the Friar's pious wish for reconciliation, as well as his own happy impulse of the moment, prompted him in the attempt to pacify Tybalt. But for the swift entanglement of real passion the Friar's gentle theory cannot serve. When he offers it as a salve for banishment, Romeo renounces the remedy with forgivable vehemence:

> "Hang up philosophy!
> Unless philosophy can make a Juliet,
> Displant a town, reverse a prince's doom,
> It helps not, it prevails not; talk no more."

The Friar naturally does not perceive that his old influence is gone; he girds him to the familiar argument of patience. "Let me dispute with thee of thy estate," he says. But Romeo sees clearly at last the disqualifications of the priestly comfort.

> "Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel:
> Wert thou as young as I, Juliet thy love,
> An hour but married, Tybalt murdered,
> Doting like me and like me banished,

> Then mightst thou speak, then mightst thou
> tear thy hair,
> And fall upon the ground, as I do now,
> Taking the measure of an unmade grave."

To be sure, Romeo leaves the Friar's cell comforted, but Shakespeare explains the comfort by the timely arrival of the nurse with a summons and a token, the ring from his bride, not by the Friar's somewhat choplogic philosophy. "O, what learning is!" exclaims the nurse. In older versions it was Romeo who was persuaded by the learning, but Shakespeare sent him away for the last time from the holy man, thinking only of his approaching visit to Juliet. After all, it is for this world rather than for the next that he sought Friar Laurence's guidance, and in this world the Friar is not expert. When the lover hears that his bride is dead, he makes his own preparations for the next world.

That Juliet should have confided in the nurse is natural, since the nurse alone of the household loved her. It is perhaps too easy, in view of the old woman's shortcomings, to forget her affection for Juliet. When Capulet in his fury lays his insulting curse on his daughter, only the nurse braves him:

> "God in heaven bless her!
> You are to blame, my lord, to rate her so."

Yet her loyalty is not single; however privileged, she is still the servant and messenger of the house. She enters the love-story with words less sinister but no less ominous than Tybalt's call for his sword. Juliet and Romeo have just met, and their fate is sealed; "Madam your mother craves a word with you," says the nurse. Between the mother and the daughter she would be loyal to the daughter, according to her lights, but the

situation is too difficult. She has, moreover, a radical failing which in time destroys Juliet's confidence in her; she represents that third contrast which Shakespeare's audience would feel more acutely perhaps than we do—she is too vulgar to understand love. She illustrates inversely, as it were, the troubadour doctrine which Dante among others bequeathed to the Renaissance, that love is identical with gentleness of heart. Her heart was warm but not gentle; the coarseness of its fibre is shown by the anecdotes she inflicts upon her mistress, and—most fatally—in the sort of advice she gives to Juliet. So long as that advice concerns Romeo, Juliet nobly misunderstands it, and takes the counsel of physical passion to be only a rude phrasing of her own pure desires; but when the nurse urges her to marry Paris, on the ground that a living husband is better than the dead or as good as dead, Juliet perceives that they talk different languages, and she confides in the nurse no more. "Speakest thou from thy heart?" she asks.

Nurse And from my soul too;
Or else beshrew them both.
Jul. Amen!
Nurse What?
Jul. Well, thou hast comforted me marvellous much.
Go in; and tell my lady I am gone,
Having displeased my father, to Laurence' cell.
To make confession and to be absolved.
Nurse Marry, I will; and this is wisely done.
(*Exit*)
Jul. Ancient damnation! O most wicked fiend!
Is it more sin to wish me thus forsworn,
Or to dispraise my lord with that same tongue
Which she hath praised him with above compare
So many thousand times? Go, counsellor;
Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain.

The change that Shakespeare here made in Brooke's

account has the effect of stressing vulgarity in the nurse, rather than immorality. In the passage just quoted, Juliet is angry with the old woman for advising her to consider Romeo a dead man, as legally he is, and to marry Paris. In Brooke's poem the nurse advised Juliet to marry Paris and at the same time encourage Romeo's love, if ever he should return, so that she might be provided with both a husband and a paramour.

These contrasts between love and hate, youth and age, gentleness and vulgarity, which serve to remove Romeo and Juliet from their environment, Shakespeare found almost ready in his material; he had but to clarify and emphasize them. But by rearranging certain episodes in the older story, he managed to isolate the lovers further, in a more subtle way—he cut them off from their own past, as he had estranged them from their surroundings, and by so doing he increased the feeling that a single experience, a single moment of fate, draws them together. Each had had in some sense an earlier love affair. Romeo had been infatuated with Rosaline, the pale lady with the dark eyes. If men fall in love first with love itself, and afterwards with a woman, the desire for Rosaline was but the illusion of an immature heart, like Duke Orsino's sentiment for Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. Instead of making his way into his lady's presence, as by Viola's success it appears he might easily have done, the Duke called for music to feed the sensation of being in love; so Romeo revels in his feelings, consults the Friar rather more than Rosaline, and makes a point of sharing his melancholy with all his friends. It was this behaviour, if we may expand the Friar's hint, which persuaded Rosaline that she ought to reject his suit; she knew

well that his love "did read by rote and could not spell." Perhaps she loved him; the Friar, who knew her best, did not think it improbable that Romeo should win her. Perhaps she would not take advantage of a sentimental boy who did not yet know his own mind; we should then understand why, when she refused him, she vowed never to marry. Whatever her motives, she is the most interesting of those unseen, hardly portrayed characters which Shakespeare frequently sketched in his early plays; we compare her with Viola's imaginary sister, who never told her love, or with Katharine's sister, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, who died of a broken heart. But Rosaline, though unseen, is far from an imaginary person. Her influence is perceptible, and in many unexpected ways she lights up Romeo's character for us. For example, she was related to the Capulets—she was a cousin of Juliet's. Was Romeo predisposed by his romantic temperament to fall in love with one of the hostile house?

It was long ago observed that as soon as he met Juliet he became another man, less sentimental, more mature. He certainly became a man of action, decisive, daring, and resolute, and his character was ennobled by love, yet he was but one man after all, and if he appears to change, it is only because the altered circumstances give us another view of him. It has been said, for example, that in his second love he ceases to be talkative, and no longer advertises his passion. Perhaps this new secrecy is somewhat due to the fact that his life now depends on it. But it is not clear that he ceases to be talkative; certainly he was always a trifler with words. Moreover, a careful reading of this play, even without other acquaintance with literary fashions in Elizabeth's reign, would show that the young Shake-

speare saw nothing amiss in elaborate word-play. The word-play of Romeo or of Juliet is not in Shakespeare's eyes a fault, nor does the habit disappear as the story proceeds. The modern reader is perplexed by Romeo's puns as he grieves for Rosaline:

Rom. Give me a torch: I am not for this ambling;
Being but heavy, I will bear the light.
Mercutio Nay, gentle Romeo, we must have you dance.
Rom. Not I, believe me: you have dancing shoes
With nimble soles: I have a soul of lead
So stakes me to the ground I cannot move.
Mercutio You are a lover; borrow Cupid's wings,
And soar with them above a common bound.
Rom. I am too sore enpierced with his shaft
To soar with his light feathers, and so bound,
I cannot bound a pitch above dull woe.

But the reader will be no less perplexed when Romeo in the same manner grieves over his banishment from Juliet:

"More honourable state, more courtship lives
In carrion-flies than Romeo; they may seize
On the white wonder of dear Juliet's hand
And steal immortal blessing from her lips,
Who, even in pure and vestal modesty,
Still blush, as thinking their own kisses sin;
But Romeo may not; he is banished:
Flies may do this, but I from this must fly."

And when the nurse enters, the impatient lover asks, "What says my *conceal'd* lady to our *cancell'd* love?" These comparisons show, not that he was less noble after he met Juliet, but that even in his sentimental days —so Shakespeare is at pains to have us understand—he was noble and lovable. Benvolio and Mercutio were devoted to him. Even the ferocious Tybalt would have been appeased by his courtesy, if Mercutio's reckless

tongue had not spoiled all. Old Capulet testifies to his reputation even among enemies—

> " He bears him like a portly gentleman,
> And, to say truth, Verona brags of him
> To be a virtuous and well govern'd youth."

And obviously he must have spent his time in other occupations besides love-dreaming; his life-passion finds him a man of accomplishments, the best swordsman in the play, for example, better than Mercutio or Paris or even Tybalt.

The change that really transfigures Romeo is the terrible sincerity that overtakes him. All that he had said or been or done in unconscious trifling, fate now remembers against him in earnest, and brings to pass. " I'll be a candle holder and look on," he had said cheerfully enough when Rosaline declined his suit, with other hints that happiness in love is not for him. But life takes him at his word, the imagined tragedy comes true, the sentimental words become fatal. Our perception that he is caught between the passion and the obstacle, that he knows the reality and is doomed, turns our attention from the trivial to the heroic in him. We cannot even tease him for over-confidence in his first love. He had gone to the Capulet ball, at Benvolio's challenge, to prove that no woman more beautiful than Rosaline would be there. " Thou canst not teach me to forget," he had sworn, yet within twenty-four hours he was saying:

> " With Rosaline, my ghostly father? no;
> I have forgot that name, and that name's woe."

In a play of another key such boasting would not pass without remark; a benedick or a Beatrice, so caught,

must stand teasing. But here the sincerity is too deep. Careless words are overlooked in the tragic shadow, or are left for fate to comment on.

It is easy for the reader to think kindly of Rosaline, whom Romeo forgot, but hard not to bear some ill-will to Paris, whose wooing of Juliet precipitated the tragedy. Our interest in the fortunes of the newly-wedded lovers makes us forget that Paris was no interloper. In the earlier versions he did present himself after the marriage and the separation of the lovers, but Shakespeare makes him ask for Juliet's hand and receive the promise of it before Juliet had ever seen Romeo. The fact that he sought Capulet's permission as a preliminary to wooing the girl, does not indicate that he was less ardent than Romeo; had it not been for the feud, Romeo might well have followed the same course. Paris certainly appears to lack his rival's capacity for expression; we expect no torrent of ecstasy or of grief from his lips. Yet if reticence has been observed in Romeo as one of the maturing effects of true love, surely Paris deserves credit for the virtue from the first. His secret visits to Juliet's tomb show that he was not devoid of sentiment. Indeed, it is singular that our pity should go out to Romeo and Juliet, and not to Paris, for he was in the truest sense a victim of love. We even forget that Juliet had accepted him, in words that parallel Romeo's boast to be true to Rosaline. Old Capulet was at least not inconsistent, though he first stipulated that Juliet should choose her husband, and afterwards compelled her to the marriage; he was angry because she seemed ready to break the family word. In form, at least, the choice of a husband had been left to her; "Can you like of Paris' love?" her mother had asked; and Juliet had answered:

"I'll look to like, if looking liking move:
But no more deep will I endart mine eye
Than your consent gives strength to make it fly."

To be sure, this answer is to her mother; Paris had no direct promise from her. Yet her words with him in Friar Laurence's cell would certainly convince a lover, eager to be convinced, that he at least knows her will, and that she is preparing to marry him. There is no rational explanation of the fate of Paris, any more than of the fate of Rosaline; those critics mislead us who would find some flaw in the character or conduct of either, as proof of their unfitness for the love of Juliet or Romeo. No Renaissance poet would have thought of love as a kind of reward of merit. By standards of ordinary obligation both Rosaline and Paris suffer harsh treatment; the poet, however, needed no other reason for their fate than the evidence of his own eyes that the contagion of love obeys no human logic, and cannot be foreseen.

If the will of love is without caprice, and yet no logic of ordinary deserts will account for it, so in the world of hate in which he sets this love the poet admits no accident, though the cause be not always evident in the effect. It is hard to sympathize with those readers who feel that Romeo and Juliet came to their end by an accident, and that therefore the story lacks the high truth of art. To what particular accident shall we attribute the end? To Friar John's failure to reach Romeo? To Friar Laurence's delay in reaching the tomb? To the fact that Capulet put the wedding forward by a day? We might consider other chances, but it is unnecessary in a story that breathes the very atmosphere of casualty. To solve a plot by coincidence may ordinarily be poor art, but not in those departments

of life where coincidence is inevitable. In tales of war or polar exploration, shall we call it accident if the hero is shot in battle or frozen in the ice-fields? The feud of Capulet and Montague prepares us for any catastrophe. The killing of Mercutio and Tybalt is unforeseen, but not accidental; had they not died then, they would have been killed the next day, or the day after. The manner and the time of the death of Romeo and Juliet can similarly be reckoned inevitable; their unsupported love fell in a gross tide of hate; the unavoidable doom enveloped them. Shakespeare seems to have taken the disaster for granted, so much so that he laid no great emphasis on the particular incidents that brought it about. His only care was to show that just as the lovers were estranged from their families and from their environment by their contrast with age, hatred and vulgarity, so in the quality of their love they were set apart, consecrated in some special fate which almost excludes from our sympathy the significant figures of Paris and Rosaline. In this treatment of his material, Shakespeare's art, one must think, was his complete understanding of young love; this isolation, this elevation, this dedication of soul, is what romantic youth everywhere recognizes as the spiritual symptom of a noble passion.

In Shakespeare's simplification of his plot, he took it for granted, as we have just said, that his characters should have no escape. But a plot which allows hero and heroine no escape will interest us less in their conduct than in their feelings; for this reason the tragic love-stories, as we have described them, are naturally lyrical. They offer us sorrow or joy for its own sake; they give us the flavour of life in a noble and intense moment. Single passages of *Romeo and Juliet* are

framed for lyrical beauty, but we sometimes forget that the whole play, though written for the stage, is a lyric. As we read or see it, we live entirely in our emotions, and know what it is to be caught between the irresistible passion and the immovable obstacle. Did not our emotions occupy us fully, such a story would be baffling in the extreme; if we looked for that harvesting of the past which is the essence of drama, we might perceive it in the death of Mercutio or Tybalt, and in the banishment of Romeo, but not in the love story, which is the principal theme. The love between Romeo and Juliet is the result of no past here revealed, nor is it in the logic of Juliet's heredity that she should be capable of love at all. Nor can we find in the story a prospect of destiny, the epic prospect; nor, if we adopted the old definition of epic which made it exhibit the will of the gods, can we make much of a divine will which contradicts itself. But it is significant that such questions are far from us while we read or see the play. In the presence of this tragedy we simply feel.

The feelings the play inspires in us indicate the innocence into which Shakespeare transposed the story, and it is probably this innocence of feeling, more than the simplification of the plot, which made the play universal. The changes in the plot are important chiefly because they bring out new lights, new values, in the portrait of hero and heroine. In Brooke's poem Juliet was sophisticated, a "wily wench," who knew how to deceive her mother, and who after her marriage and Romeo's banishment encouraged Paris to make love to her. Her mother trusted neither her nor the nurse, but set another servant to watch them. In Brooke, Juliet is experienced and calculating; she knows all the symptoms of falling in love, so that she can diagnose

her case, and provides herself with a reason for marrying Romeo if he can be got to propose—the hope that their union may end the feud. Shakespeare assigns this good wish to the Friar, and takes from Juliet her craft and her experience, so that she becomes innocent and pure, almost fragile:

> "So light a foot
> Will ne'er wear out the everlasting flint."

By betrothing her to Paris before she has even met Romeo, at a stroke the poet refines her character and converts Paris into a tragic victim. Shakespeare also reduces her age, as we saw, from sixteen years to fourteen, just as a previous version reduced it to sixteen from eighteen; to increase the pathos by making her younger was perhaps a natural tendency. In Brooke's poem and in other accounts of the story, Romeo too was less fine. He went to the Capulet feast, for example, not in defiance of his friend's advice to fall in love with another beauty, but actually in the hope of finding a substitute for his obdurate mistress. Shakespeare made him an uncalculating lover, with delicacy of speech and manners. Perhaps inspired with Protestant overzeal, Brooke had hinted that Friar Laurence's retired cell, where Romeo and Juliet were married, had served the ghostly father in his youth for amorous adventures of his own; Shakespeare imagined the Friar as noble and sincere. He also brought out, as we saw, the contrast between the age of the parents and the youth of the lovers; he brought out the contrast of the Friar's philosophy with Romeo's passion, of the nurse's vulgarity with Juliet's refinement; he gave the tone of destiny to the feud by introducing Tybalt early, at the moment when Romeo sees Juliet; he developed in

Mercutio that gaiety which now reinforces in the story the atmosphere of youth, just as he increased the suddenness with which the lovers realized their passion, making them fall in love actually at first sight; and by crowding the action of the story into days instead of months, he set the whole tragedy in the abrupt, volcanic atmosphere of youthful romance.

These changes contribute to a wonderful purity of character and conduct—all the more wonderful since the play exhibits, along with its spiritual innocence, such a natural frankness towards the physical basis of love as a close study of the text makes even startling. Would Juliet be so specific in her thoughts? If so, what constitutes the immense gulf between her nature and that of the nurse? The difference is that Romeo and Juliet, speaking frankly of the body, think always of the soul; recognizing intuitively, as the philosopher says, that life "is animal in its origin," they feel as instinctively that it is "spiritual in its possible fruits." So they keep the beauty of this world before our eyes, and ideal values in our thoughts—and to no other love-story can such praise be wholly given. But perhaps Shakespeare ought not to have all the credit for this idealization. Perhaps we should not leave out of account those noble heroines who had fascinated the English imagination just before he wrote or just at the same moment—Surrey's rather dim but exquisite Geraldine, Sidney's Stella, Spenser's Una and Florimel, and the heroines of Greene's novels and plays. If they did not influence Shakespeare, does not their fame indicate a public admiration for the ideal they illustrated? At least it was in the direction of this ideal that Shakespeare remoulded his story, and the chief impression his lovers still make is of an impassioned innocence. This fact answers our original

question, why *Romeo and Juliet* should to-day enjoy an immortality so general wherever English poetry is known. The sense of the dignity of life and the sympathy with human wrongs, to which time has accustomed mankind, have brought as an inevitable corollary a certain lukewarmness towards all ancient love-legends except this. Meanness and trickery now obscure the beauty of Helen, of Cleopatra, of Iseult, of Guinevere, and of their lovers; to them we do not look for patterns of perfection. Héloïse and Abélard are indeed young, but vows surreptitously broken stain their memory. Of all the tragedies dear to the Renaissance, this alone of Romeo and Juliet became thoroughly accommodated to English ideals, and in the process, fitted to express the dream that young love now has of itself everywhere.

VI
THE TEMPEST

VI

THE TEMPEST

THE story of *The Tempest* may seem at first sight to be not of our day. It tells us of the Duke of Milan, Prospero, who somewhat at the expense of his realm devoted himself to study. The actual government he handed over to his brother, Antonio, who, growing ambitious and gradually murderous, at last caused Prospero and his infant daughter, Miranda, to be cast adrift at sea. In the open boat, for ironic effect, Antonio placed also those books which had so disastrously monopolized Prospero's attention. Instead of drowning, however, the duke and his child were blown to shore on a strange island. There his magic enslaved Ariel, a light-hearted spirit, and Caliban, and there the precious leisure of twelve solitary years enabled him to perfect his art until by raising a storm he was able to bring into his power the treacherous brother and the King of Naples, returning with their company from marrying Claribel to the King of Tunis. At this point the drama begins. The five brief acts show us what harvest each character reaps from the past—what judgment on their conduct the gods pronounce who delay but do not forget.

Though this fantastic legend seems far from a modern mood, the actual play rouses in us quite

contemporary thoughts. It makes us consider the mysterious problem of justice. We have our own reasons for meditating this theme. With us justice may be an economic question, or it may be linked up with some personal ambition to which society we feel is hostile. An intelligent reader, however, will translate into his own experience the terms in which the problem came to the famous poet, or he will read himself into the Elizabethan image.

But if Shakespeare in this great play is remote from our time, perhaps it is just because the question of justice concerned him more than it does us. The difference is in favour of his sensitiveness to the genuine problems of life. Not only in *The Tempest* but also in *The Winter's Tale* and in *Cymbeline*—in the three plays, that is, which are thought to be his latest—he pictured life as a troubled adventure in which a kind of inner retribution at last justifies the good and the wise, and exposes the wicked and the mistaken. Less genial, far more relentless, the same theme reappears in *King Lear;* the wrong that Gloucester committed cost him his eyes; the wilfulness of Lear ruined his house; and Edgar like a Greek chorus pronounced the moral, that " the gods are just, and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us." Of *Macbeth* also, to extend the list no further, justice is the theme; the poet-king, nerving himself for the murder, foresaw with tragic clearness the peculiarly inward effect of what he was about to do, the defiling of his imagination, the recoil upon himself of his own deeds. " In these cases," he said, " we still have judgment here."

That Shakespeare wrote so often about justice, is not surprising. The fact is that the Renaissance had the habit of asking what justice is. Justice was one of the

four Aristotelian virtues, indeed the one which the tradition of the great philosopher had chiefly made commonplace in European thought, until every schoolboy was familiar with the dialectic of the problems that beset it. Justice would seem to be the minimum desire of the righteous man; whatever other virtue you have, you must be just. But justice is the most difficult aspect of righteousness to define. We may fancy for our comfort that it is a certain order prevailing like gravitation in the world, but experience confutes this hope; it is for us to bring justice into existence, however we may define it. We may prudently look into its Latin etymology, and say it is the enforcement of the law. Edmund Spenser so approached the theme in the fifth book of *The Faerie Queene*, where Artegal, aided by Talus, the iron man, makes the laws prevail. Perhaps the gentle Spenser would not have committed himself to this definition, if, as we have seen, Lord Grey of Wilton, the friend whom he portrayed in Artegal, had not been governing Ireland with a hand so severe as to startle even the rough times of Queen Elizabeth. Spenser's definition of justice led him to condemn mercy —an undesirable but inevitable conclusion, since justice defined as the enforcement of law is little concerned with mercy; he condemned mercy as liable to become cruel, liable indeed to seem in the end much the same thing as tyranny. In *Measure for Measure* we detest the perfidy of Angelo, who himself wished to commit the crime for which he sentenced another; but even had he remained beyond reproach in his private life, we should still condemn the cruelty of the justice he dispensed, his literal enforcement of the penalty, his blindness to the helpful and curing aspects of punishment. His theory of justice, had he been sincere, would have been identical

with Artegal's, and we should still have protested in Isabella's words,

" Oh just but severe law!
I do think that you might pardon him
And neither heaven nor man grieve at the mercy."

Had we made the protest to Spenser, he would have replied, as indeed he taught in his poem, that mercy is injustice, since it encourages men to hope the law will not be enforced. Shakespeare was familiar with the same dialectic; he makes Angelo say,

" The law hath not been dead, though it hath slept:
Those many had not dared to do that evil,
If the first that did the edict infringe
Had answer'd for his deed."

To this logic there is perhaps no reply; Isabella found none, except to plead, " yet show some pity." Angelo repeated his argument, " I show it most of all when I show justice."

It is remarkable that Spenser should have defended the literal interpretation of justice; it is not remarkable that Shakespeare should have portrayed the limitations of that interpretation, since they were in his time the commonplaces of popular philosophy. The church had preached the beatitude of mercy; Shakespeare after all gives us only a paraphrase of what he might have heard from any pulpit. Or if he had been a great reader of books, he would have been familiar with discussions of justice which owed something to the *Republic*. No one ever showed so well as Plato the difficulty of defining the virtue. What is it? Is it the giving to a man what is his own? Perhaps his own will be harmful. Is justice to be simply punishment for wrongdoing? Then what is the object of punishment—to improve or to make worse? Shall we give any punishment which handicaps the criminal?

No large group of men would interest themselves greatly in philosophical discussions if life at the moment did not compel them to do so. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance were concerned with Aristotle and with Plato because their days supplied questions which they thought these philosophers might answer. The Renaissance in particular was an age of disturbance; we sometimes forget it was not entirely a life of beauty or of high colour. Rather it was a time of action and of passion, and not all passions are mindful of beauty. "Dust had closed Helen's eyes," sings the English poet. "Beauty departs. The happiness of life is brief." This phrase of the passing of lovely things indicated perhaps an essential conflict in the thoughtful, who through the Middle Ages had tried to combine a philosophy which set its heart on a life hereafter, with a philosophy which found value in life here. But even if the philosophy of the Renaissance had been simple rather than complex, the accidents and the adventures of the time would have compelled men to see as the plainest of facts that youth was often cut down, that beauty frequently ended in disaster, that princes were often overthrown. Mary Stuart went to her death; Sir Philip Sidney died in battle; the poet Marlowe was murdered; Shakespeare himself reached old age prematurely. Life in the Renaissance, if one escaped a violent death, was turbulent and exhausting, and in the mid-whirl of it men perceived with difficulty, if at all, a coherent plan of retribution. The man of the street found his comfort or his fortitude in a stoic philosophy, as men encourage themselves where sudden death is daily faced. The more contemplative adopted the same philosophy, but discussed their theories of justice and of equity as though playing with the hope that somehow

life might at last remould itself to men's nobler desires. In the stories popular during the sixteenth century one of the frequent plots is the old fairy tale of good men cast into misfortune or danger either by accident or villainy and restored either by good luck or by their own merit. Such stories must have seemed true at that period when the extremes of fortune were wider apart than they are now. Shakespeare was fond of them, but not more fond than other men of his age. He gave us such disasters and such rescues in *Cymbeline*, in *The Winter's Tale*, in *Twelfth Night*, to name only three instances; and in many of his plots, as in other stories of the time, the situation for good or for evil was caused by that common Elizabethan accident, shipwreck. It is not difficult to find among such tales many that resemble the plot of *The Tempest;* in fact, in every country at that time so many stories were told of the good and thoughtful man cast out by envy and restored by his own inherent worth, that one critic after another has found sources for Shakespeare's play—sources derived from France, from Italy, from Germany. Shakespeare may have known all of these stories, but there is no reason to think that he borrowed from them, or that he necessarily had made their acquaintance; he told a story in the vogue of the moment which naturally resembles other stories of the same type.

It is useful to study this background of Shakespeare's play if we would guess what was probably in the minds of the first audience; it is useful also to remember that Shakespeare was probably unconscious of these interpretations. He differed from his audience in that he was a dramatist, and from other dramatists in being more of a dramatist than they. The dramatic temperament sees in any moment of life a reaping of the past;

it sees in every crisis the sum of many antecedent actions set in motion unconsciously or consciously; the business of the dramatist is to make the crisis interpret those actions, so that the audience sees in each crisis a judgment self-pronounced on the men and women in the play. The dramatist believes instinctively that fortune is a matter of character—in Emerson's words, that "deep in the man sits fast his fate," and that justice comes to pass in the world only as character lives itself out, and takes the consequences of itself. The drama is the most popular form of art because though few men have the ability to see in any crisis such a reaping of conduct as the great dramatist can demonstrate, yet all men do believe the demonstration when once it is made. We all believe that the characters of men are constant, and that once we know a man's character we know what he will do. To state our ordinary attitude in these terms may seem to exaggerate, yet we count on our friends to act in a certain way in any given set of circumstances; we understand that with their character they will have no choice. To defend ourselves, however, against a too machine-like reading of life, we believe that character, to some extent at least, can be trained, that a man, at least when he is young, can choose his own character. This is the whole wisdom of the peasant or the business-man or the statesman, who finds in the character of the people with whom he deals an index as to how they will act. In life we observe character in order to guess the future conduct of men; on the stage the dramatist projects backward the events which explain the crisis he shows us. A great play, so defined, will represent the last moment of the story, and the characters in the play will explain all the moments that went before to produce that plot.

The scene of *The Tempest* opens a mere twenty-four hours before the long adventure of Prospero is ended, and we are permitted to see his finished character and through that to understand the earlier moments in his life, and the final crisis itself. We do hear some phrases which refer to an exterior fate, to the gods, to fortune, but these are only phrases; fate is within the characters, and so is whatever justice the play shows.

What then is Prospero's character on the stage? And what of his past is implied in it? It has been the habit of Shakespearian criticism to see in the island magician a fragment of autobiography, a self-portrait of the dramatist at the moment when he was taking leave of his art. With such a premise, the critics have felt obliged to admire Prospero without reservation. It is time to remind ourselves, though to do so may seem ungracious, that Prospero is not a model of perfection, and that it is ridiculous to find in him a direct image of the poet. If we lay aside the tradition that he is meant to be Shakespeare himself, we are freer perhaps to observe the limitations of the character, or if we do not at once observe them, we can analyse our instinctive judgments, which are not all of them favourable. Instinctively we are troubled when Prospero tells us that he delegated the ruling of his dukedom, or when he refuses to give liberty to Ariel, as he had promised, or when he curses Caliban. He seems studious but not wise, noble in his tastes but not in his conduct. His unwillingness to assume his proper responsibilities springs from the fact that to him life is unreal; he says we are such stuff as dreams are made of, and what he does and what he tries not to do, confirms our impression that he was a stranger to actual things. Those who believe that life is a dream are likely to be

egotists, for themselves at least they always think real. Prospero tells us that though he neglected his dukedom, his people loved him; we doubt the statement, since he is not to us lovable, and his testimony is not otherwise supported. We even question the intensity of his affection for Miranda and Ferdinand. Obviously he is fond of them, but he is much more interested in ideas, in the judgment which they illustrate, and which he has helped to bring on. Furthermore, he is not entirely satisfactory to himself; he has a troubled disposition, as though his fine taste and his egotism were at war.

As for his wisdom—when we see how little of it he has, nothing seems less flattering to Shakespeare than the supposition that in Prospero he portrayed himself. He has the philosopher's gift of analysis, but he lacks imagination; he can foresee nothing that men will do. What could be more superb than his description of the steps by which Antonio persuaded himself to seize the dukedom? Yet he had not foreseen that Antonio would seize it, that the man who ruled in fact would at last feel it his right to rule in name. Nor did he foresee what would be the conduct of Caliban when taken abruptly into society. At first he thought Caliban altogether a good character, and taught him speech and simple arts; when Caliban behaved according to his nature, Prospero pronounced him altogether bad. In both judgments he was extreme. Shakespearian criticism has sought to save his reputation somewhat by attributing to Miranda the attempt to educate Caliban; if, as the folios indicate, it is she who utters the speech in the first act in which Caliban is told that he will take no print of goodness, being capable of all ill, then we must suppose that the inexperienced girl credited the savage with more virtues than he possessed;

but if the speech really belongs to Prospero, as Dryden thought, and as the best editions now agree, then it was Prospero who misjudged Caliban. Nor was he perhaps quite sure of Ferdinand's character, for the admonition he pronounced by way of wedding blessing was anything but a compliment for the young man, even in days of Elizabethan frankness.

Prospero lacks wisdom also when he deals with Miranda. At the very moment when she is profoundly moved by the shipwreck, by the sight of men dying, as she supposes, her father asks her to listen attentively while he tells the family history. She cannot avoid some inattention, however, still suffering as she does from the shock of what she has seen, and he calls her sharply to account. In his dealings with her, as in his dealings with Ariel and with Caliban, we see that like many other scholars who think themselves above the practical affairs of life, he has it in him, when opportunity offers, to be something of a tyrant. Much as she respects her father, Miranda does not try to understand him, and she knows better than to believe him implicitly. She who has never seen the world, is far more in touch with life than he. When she exclaims, at sight of the king and his party, " O, brave new world that has such people in it ! " Prospero, knowing by experience the quality of these men, replies, " 'Tis new to thee." This is perhaps his wisest remark, yet Miranda is unconvinced; he has not hitherto told the truth about life—he said only a few moments before that in comparison with other men, Ferdinand was but a Caliban.

We owe it to Shakespeare's astounding vision of life as it is, that in Prospero himself, the victim of injustice, we observe the difficulty even good men have in being

just. He took the island from Caliban, no doubt for the good of the island, but Caliban feels that he is robbed, and we feel the irony of life, since by Prospero's own account Antonio stole the dukedom for this same reason —for the good of society. The dukedom belonged to Prospero, but he was incapable of ruling it; did his right to it cease? Plato thought it unjust to give a man what belongs to him, if that is not for his good. The more we study our own feelings towards the drama, the more we perceive that Caliban has our sympathy; and if we try to make our sense of justice logical, we take his part. Ariel too appeals to us, though his shadowy voice is almost all his personality. Prospero is unjust to him also, or at least incurs the suspicion of being so. Having rescued Ariel, he uses him as a slave. When Ariel pleads for his promised liberty, it is not clear that Prospero is keeping with strict fidelity the bargain he made. We shall care to glance again at this turn in the drama—the unwillingness of Ariel to serve Prospero, and Prospero's own concession that he has no permanent right to Ariel's services.

The kind of justice which Shakespeare does portray in Prospero's story is the kind that men believe in who love life more than the philosophy of books. Prospero comes to his own; his character finds its logical conclusion in experience. When Miranda hears that he once was Duke of Milan, she exclaims, " What foul play had we, that we came from thence? or blessed was't we did? " Her question suggests the double quality in his fate, answering to the mixture of good and bad in himself, and to the justice which permits strong characters to turn to good account even the disasters of their career. Prospero neglected his dukedom in order to pursue his study; the neglect caused his banish-

ment, but the studies turned that exile into an opportunity for power. Antonio and Alonzo are outwardly disgraced and they must restore the Duchy of Milan, and in an inward way they are punished by knowing that the society which their own example has formed has in it treacherous elements. Prospero is rewarded outwardly by the marriage of his daughter to the king's son and by the recovery of his dukedom, and inwardly by the knowledge that the dukedom means nothing to him, or less than it meant before.

It is for this reason that Prospero is rightly admired among Shakespeare's creations, not because he is a representative of wisdom, for that he is not, but because he illustrates in this fairy tale what we observe in life, that characters are mixed, that those men who pursue intellectual ends are satisfied in intellectual ways, that those who deal only with the outward things of life may be blind to the effect of their own actions, and that in any case a man's total character, good and bad, tends to create the atmosphere in which he lives. Whether or not Shakespeare realized it, there is something profound in Prospero's unwillingness to punish his enemies. The mercy springs, perhaps, from his own indolence in practical things, or from a tenderness towards the prince whom his daughter is to marry; but we observe that justice has already been satisfied even before the shipwreck, since the character of Prospero is become so developed that he no longer needs the dukedom which is restored to him. The picture is not complete. We do not know, for example, whether Antonio was a good or a bad ruler of Milan; from Prospero's own account, he probably was efficient. The drama would have been more fully significant perhaps had Shakespeare represented Antonio as beyond

question an excellent governor. But the essential justice of the story is shown in any case. Prospero is at home in his "full poor cell," because in solitude he has become from his own point of view a master of life; in his conduct he has expressed his character; he would suddenly appear mean and untrue to himself should he exact from Antonio the penalty richly deserved, since that kind of justice would imply that after all he was not master of his own life, but needed some external protection. Antonio is really condemned, though no penalty is inflicted; for his power was outward and never belonged to him, and he has no resources within himself when it is taken away.

Not Prospero but Miranda furnishes the poetic charm of *The Tempest;* or rather, the picture of justice in life is not complete until we have included Miranda with Prospero, for she is, in a way, part of his character and an expression of it. At least, this is the effect that she makes upon the reader. Nothing in literature, perhaps, certainly nothing in English literature, is comparable to the charm of her innocence—innocence curiously mixed with the interest in life which belongs to youth. If it were not for this vivid interest, she would remind us of Camilla in the *Æneid*, that incarnation of the freshness of unspoiled nature; but Camilla represents an innocence withdrawn from life, a type nun-like in its severity, whereas Miranda will clap her hands for joy at the sight of the brave new world washed up on her father's island. Her innocence of heart is made possible by her detachment from society, yet in her temperament she is as social as her father is egotistic. If she has been contented with the little world of three characters in which her fifteen years have been spent, yet how marvellously she has studied that little world!

She too is destined to find what her character seeks. One feels that if Prospero had cared as much for society as his daughter cares, he would not have lost his dukedom, and we are sure that when they return to Naples and to Milan, father and daughter will find an immediate divergence in their fate; she will throw herself into the new life, but he, incorrigible recluse, will, as he says, retire, and every third thought will be his grave.

The relations of Miranda and her father during the twelve years of their exile together Shakespeare was singularly happy in contrasting with her relations with her lover. Until she finds her true fate, her nature is docile; until that moment she has received most sensitively the impress of her father's speech, his very phrase, and even some reflection of his severe judgments upon society. But when Ferdinand appears, her passive obedience is immediately superseded by the wide energy of love, convincing as child wisdom is—a wisdom instinctive and clear like eyesight, which makes her from that moment the comrade no longer of her father but of Ferdinand. In a sense, her docility is the one portion of Prospero's happiness which does not belong to him, and in the hour of justice it is taken away. Her character, therefore, is shown in two phases, and it is the second phase, after she has fallen in love, that fascinates all readers. Why should she be so charming? Her frankness, her dignity, the directness with which she declares her love at sight to the man whom she would marry, touch us more than perhaps we realize; she enjoys the privilege that all youth has at some time dreamed of, to love and to express love without hindrance of time or place, without shadow of misunderstanding. She and Ferdinand

only gaze at each other, "change eyes," as Prospero said, and their hearts are one; they take each other's hand and are fixed in an immortal moment of happiness —shall we say, like a girl and boy of the golden age of Theocritus or of Virgil? Rather like the girl and boy each of us, man and woman, still would be, could but the Sicilian muses bring us fresh youth again— youth fresher and wiser than we had. Such love is not found often, not even in books. We observe that Miranda and Ferdinand differ essentially from Romeo and Juliet. For once, love in this story is without difficulties or obstacles; it is as youth instinctively understands it should be. Prospero shows himself as blind to love as were the Montagues and the Capulets when he sets Ferdinand at irksome labour in order to provide artificially some of that hardship which, he says, all passion should undergo. But the younger generation knows better that the romance of life is instant and perfect comradeship; in the matchless scene in which they declare their love for each other Ferdinand and Miranda strike a simpler note than can be found even in her story before she met the prince. The frankness youth yearns for is a privilege of innocence, and the genius of Shakespeare makes this clear. When Ferdinand and Miranda have each declared love to the other, they clasp hands; there is no courtly compliment, no kiss, not even of the hand she has given; had there been, we should have missed in the scene that ecstasy of innocence which is native to Miranda and which Ferdinand is quick to honour.

What this romance of youth could become in an art only less sensitive, we observe by comparing the story of Miranda and Ferdinand with the episode of Juan and Haidee. This episode, like most of Byron's oriental

tales, reproduces certain aspects of the plot of *The Tempest*—a girl who knows nothing of the world, a lover perhaps who knows too much of it, a father or a guardian of the heroine who, from age or from temperament, is out of sympathy with the young lovers and opposes their happiness. This lack of sympathy in Prospero is but pretended; Shakespeare does not permit it to shadow the happiness of Miranda and Ferdinand. Byron, however, exaggerates Prospero's attitude into positive antipathy. The scene of his story also is an island, which as in *The Tempest* takes on, perhaps in spite of the author, a symbolic meaning, as though innocence such as this must be remote in some far sea, detached from the mainland of daily life. Byron, however, did not imagine the innocence that Shakespeare represented. Though he too gave us the dream youth cherishes, of frankness, of comradeship, of complete harmony of spirit, yet the story he tells is coloured with passion of which the lovers themselves are not unconscious, and the innocence of his heroines is too closely identified with complete ignorance; we wonder to what extent experience with life will steal away the charm. They are not destined to happiness in society as Miranda is. The point might be made in another way by saying that Romeo and Juliet are the tragic exaggeration of the sorrow of young love, and so far as they are exaggerations, they are exceptional; that Byron's heroes also are exceptional, since they are adventurers who from time to time are lifted into noble moments by contact with complete innocence; but that Miranda and Ferdinand simply represent youth, and are destined for that happiness in love which ought to be normal. If at first they seem less interesting than Romeo and Juliet, it is because their fate is clear and

the details of their story few; but the charm of their story is more penetrating, and it may be more permanent.

In some respects, Ferdinand represents Shakespeare's tact better than any other character in the play. He is the son of the king who aided Antonio to usurp the dukedom of Milan and who was an accomplice in the intended murder of Prospero. Why should not the child of such a father carry some taint of his race and of the world he moves in? He does carry the mark of his past, but so lightly that we can still admire him. Outwardly he has the same manners as Alonzo, Antonio, Gonzalo; they are all well-bred, disillusioned, stoical. They all take the same attitude towards fortune and towards the justice of life. Life for them is a game in which the adventurous play for high stakes and the prudent risk as little as possible; but even the prudent are sometimes wrecked by the adventure of their neighbours or by the very nature of the game itself. In any case, one must be self-possessed. Even the murderers Sebastian and Antonio keep up their courage and their good manners; being found out, they lose bravely. One must be polite also, even towards the unworthy. Gonzalo is called kind and loyal, but he is none the less courteous towards Antonio and Alonzo whom he knows to be wilful murderers and, as he thinks, successful ones. This stoic attitude towards life contrasts with Prospero's control of his own fate; perhaps it also makes more clear to the reader the kind of justice of which Prospero dreamed. He finds a meaning in life; Alonzo and his group, even Ferdinand, appreciate change of fortune, but draw from it no moral. We are allowed to see that Ferdinand has often fallen in love and always recovered, until his heart has lost

somewhat of its bloom; he can no longer idolize Miranda as Romeo would have done. Otherwise he is a character of few traits; he respects his father, he is self-possessed, he is courteous to Prospero though he does not like him, and he is brave. We are tempted to say that he is no genius, that he is expert in nothing but manners; that he does nothing heroic; that he is merely an average youth. Yet we admire him, and he remains in our memory almost as lovable a character as Miranda herself, lighted up perhaps by some of her charm but certainly contributing to the picture a charm of his own. Those lines of his character which suggest the society from which he comes are not after all unfavourable traits, and the very fact that he is an average youth gives power to our impression that Miranda's happiness and his is an ideal of normal happiness. He understands the worldly group of men with whom he has lived, but apparently he has found some good traits in them, and he appreciates at the same time, as they do not, perhaps, that special beauty of character which is Miranda's. If he is not so passionate as Romeo in speech nor perhaps in feeling, yet his very common sense and the moderation with which he can speak of his love charms us. He finds words to express the mingling in him of experience and yet unspoiled youth which would have been beyond the scope of Romeo. When his father, for example, asks whether Miranda is a goddess, his reply suggests at once a disposition not to exaggerate his adoration and yet the persuasion that his happiness could not be exaggerated, "Sir, she is mortal, but by immortal providence she's mine."

To Shakespeare's audience probably Caliban was such a savage as they had heard of from returned mariners or had read about in Hakluyt's voyages; he

is the record in great poetry of what the Elizabethan imagined the native American to be. The sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries did not realize the Indian as a happy savage; admiration for primitive man, so far as the English reader was concerned, was to begin later in the age of Rousseau. For sixteenth and seventeenth century Englishmen the illustrations of unorganized society were the impoverished Irish as the poet Spenser had described them, or the American Indians as sailors reported them. The point of view appears in formal literature in the famous passage from the *Leviathan*, where Hobbes speaks of the Natural Condition of mankind as concerning their Felicity and Misery; "Whatsoever, therefore, is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same is consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building, no instruments of moving or removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death, and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." The readers of Shakespeare in the seventeenth century would interpret the character of Caliban in some such terms as these, leaving to the critics of the romantic period to contrast him with Ariel as two symbols of life, one altogether brute, the other altogether intellectual.

To the modern reader Caliban is interesting as the

complement or parallel of Miranda's character, and as giving additional point to the question of justice. The resemblances between him and Miranda are many. He had the same kind of admiration for his mother, the witch Sycorax, that she had for her father; they both respected the magic art. If Miranda transferred her allegiance later to Ferdinand, paying tribute, let us fancy, to the more powerful magic of love, Caliban also transferred his admiration, such as it was, to Prospero, finding him more powerful than Sycorax; he would have deserted Prospero in turn for the more powerful-seeming Stephano, when once he had tasted the "celestial liquor" the drunken sailor shared with him, for that drink was obviously stronger than the beverage Prospero furnished—"water with berries in it"—or as the commentators explain, coffee. In his limited experience he had the same shrewd sense as Miranda. When Stephano and Trinculo were on their way to release him by murdering Prospero, he was unwilling that they should turn aside to steal coats from the clothes line; rather he urged them to reach at once the source of Prospero's magic by stealing his books. Like Miranda, he was dignified by unusual sincerity, and since he was as ignorant of other society as she, he made the same comment on the courtiers when first he saw them—he admired the bravery of the new world. Indeed, by his love of beauty, and his sensitiveness to nature Caliban was profoundly poetic. His description of life in the enchanted isle was not only gorgeous in itself, but it showed on his part a conscious appreciation of beauty, for on waking to his lowly state from the dreams that Ariel's music caused, he cried to dream again. When he saw Prospero dressed as Duke of Milan, even though he learned at that moment that his

wrongdoing was found out, he commented first on what he felt most strongly, his master's fine appearance. What he said to Stephano, to praise Miranda's beauty, is one authentic instance of a lover's exaggeration falling within the fact—" she as far surpasseth Sycorax as greatest does least." Finally, to complete the parallel between him and Miranda, if upon contact with the new world she learned quickly, so did he; at the end of the story, when Prospero pardoned him, we are pleased that his repentance expressed itself not as moral discomfort but as an access of intelligence—" what a thrice-double ass was I, to take this drunkard for a god."

More even than by his response to beauty, Caliban is dignified by his cause; he cherishes an injury, and his sense of justice raises him intellectually above Miranda, somewhat into Prospero's realm. In a strange way, he makes us think about society. Prospero may be a character of sheer romance, but Caliban is such a problem as the poor, the ignorant and the near-brute have forced upon us during the last hundred years; so that poets and those of poetic feeling, like Renan or Browning, sensitive to our responsibility towards the underdeveloped portion of the race, have returned to him as to an image of social injustice and of social insufficiency. They would not have made use of his character for this purpose, had not Caliban challenged us all, certainly on the score of justice and perhaps on the score of prudence also, for we dare not turn away from what he suggests. Even his plot to kill Prospero seems less despicable than the attempt of Sebastian and Antonio to destroy the King of Naples, for Caliban would merely win back his freedom, as he thinks, from the tyrant who has enslaved him, and it is hardly too

subtle to establish a parallel between the restoration he desires and that which Prospero enjoys.

It is the nature of poetic genius to see life whole, as Arnold said, to give all the picture. In Shakespeare we learn to watch for the characters on the fringe of the picture or in the background, who are unaware of what befalls around them, but who are caught in the complete view of the scene. Trinculo and Stephano are such characters in *The Tempest.* They not only miss the significance of their fate; they are not even aware of the changes of fortune. They have no part in the important crises of life, they are not seriously touched by the fear of death. They have no scale of values for daily experience. The Renaissance would have called them simply vulgar, or would have disposed of them by one aristocratic gesture. Modern ideals of society make us reluctant in this wholesale disposition of the "heads without name," the ridiculous vulgar, but Shakespeare undoubtedly observes here a fact, whether we care to read that fact with indifference or with concern. Seeing the world as it is, he included in the picture what should appear in any picture equally true to-day—a certain proportion of natures to whom the problems of justice or morality mean nothing, who are hurried like straws down stream, who in all ways are inferior to Caliban.

Shakespeare's imagination at its best had also a certain carrying power which seems to make live before us, not only the characters which fringe the scene, but even some which do not appear in it at all. Such a character was Rosaline, in *Romeo and Juliet,* that dark-eyed girl with the pale face whom Romeo wooed before he met Juliet. She was his first love, too fine of spirit, as Shakespeare permits us to suspect, to accept the vows

of a boy who did not yet know his mind. Such a character—two of them, in fact—live in the story of *The Tempest,* unseen on the stage, but explaining the action there.

The first of these is more often noted—Sycorax, the mother of Caliban, banished from Algiers "for mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible." The interest we feel in this hag with the sunken eyes is struck out for us by a single line; she deserved death, but the Algerians would not inflict that penalty; "for one good thing she did they would not take her life." Charles Lamb was not the only reader of Shakespeare who has pondered on this mystery. What was the one good thing she did? Not only does the question carry our imagination into romantic labyrinths; it also furnishes a sort of credit to poor Caliban, who by this account has a tradition not altogether bad. Like her son, Sycorax has a personality, though the sketch of it is meagre; Caliban remembers her as only less powerful than Prospero, and the duke himself refers to her art in terms that at least show respect. Ariel served her before serving him. There is something majestic in the conception of the chaos she started to create and at her death left in an arrested state, with Ariel prisoned in the cloven pine, Caliban not yet more than a freckled whelp, nature distorted and angry under her commands. What would she have made of the work had she lived? Was she really less powerful than Prospero? She maintained her own against the Algerians, and she died before Prospero reached her island.

More romantic, but rarely if ever noted in criticism, is Claribel, the king's daughter, from whose marriage to the King of Tunis the royal party are returning at the moment of the shipwreck. She was Ferdinand's sister,

and a paragon of beauty, and there was tragedy in her wedding. "'Twas a sweet marriage, and we prosper well in our return," says Sebastian with sarcasm that is explained later. He tells us that the girl disliked the African king her father chose to be her husband, that the court begged him to spare her, and that she hesitated between loathing and obedience, until her will gave way and she suffered herself to be the victim of her father's ambition. We might suspect Sebastian's charge to be the mere impudence of his character, for he is not the man to be scrupulous in his statements, but no one contradicts him, and Gonzalo indeed confirms him with the reproof, "The truth you speak doth lack some gentleness." The king practically accepts the accusation.

What really was the fate and the character of Claribel? Shakespeare plays upon her name in phrases of music, which furnish romantic disguise for the plain story of her fate—"fair daughter Claribel," "She that is queen of Tunis, she that dwells ten leagues beyond man's life." But the king, her father, regrets his treatment of her, and sees in his disasters a speedy retribution. "Would I had never married my daughter there," he sighs. What does Ferdinand think of his sister? He does not once mention her. We wonder, if our subtlety proceeds so far, whether he too thought she had been sacrificed, or whether he had perceived in her character some worldly ambition which would crush down her own heart to advance her state. Did she after all inherit something of her father's nature, and is she the contrast to Miranda's innocence? At least she is one of the women whom Ferdinand knew, and he testifies of all that he ever cared for, that he never admired any so completely, but some defect

defeated his love. Of her mother, as of Miranda's, nothing is known.

These are the portraits which Shakespeare has studied in *The Tempest*—Prospero, Miranda and Ferdinand, Caliban, the characters off the stage and the characters in the background. They come together by the accident of the tides that wash them up on the island, or rather by the tide of justice in life shovelled together again, in Carlyle's phrase. Retribution and compensation are most clearly illustrated in Prospero, since he is the central study, but all the persons in the drama to some degree enjoy a fortune suited to their deserts. Justice in so far as there is such a thing is shown by the fatal working out of character. To show this is the work of all drama, and a play which deals with this theme, which exhibits many lives gathered in an illuminated crisis, should be to the highest degree dramatic. No one would say, however, that *The Tempest* is as dramatic as Ibsen's *Ghosts*, nor even that it is dramatic at all. It is rather a dream poem, and the people in it seem passive witnesses rather than actors of their destiny. This might well be so of Alonzo and of Antonio, but should not Prospero, the magician, seem to be in conscious control of his art?

The difficulty comes with the character of Ariel, in whom the art of Prospero is externalized. If the duke has mastered the secrets of life by his own study, then his power should really be his, part of his character, inseparable from his personality; his magic books and his wand should be admirable things, not fearful; the practice of his magic should be a duty at least to himself. But throughout the story it is Ariel who is really the magician, and at the close Ariel is set free as though Prospero's art were but temporary and accidental, and

the books and the magic wand are buried and broken as though they were temptations, and their master promises to use his power no more. We wonder whether we have misread the play—whether the justice in it is really the work of the gods who delay but who do not forget, or whether it is all a fantastic contrivance of the sprite Ariel. Perhaps Ariel's power was an error in drama, producing a confusion in philosophy. Ariel is as impersonal and as unreal to our sympathies as gravitation or the molecular theory; the presence of the sprite in the drama makes *The Tempest* impractical for the stage; and the idea of external power contradicts the view of justice which the play otherwise would disclose. Shakespeare was not primarily a philosopher; perhaps the contradiction would not have troubled him. It troubles us, let us confess, on moral as well as on artistic grounds; for studying life as we now must do and reading great books for their interpretation of life, we are forced to reflect that though the wisest of us would think always of justice and of power as matters of character, yet man is still in some respects a child, and the child may persist in the poet and in some of his audience, still hoping to find the contrivance or to chance upon the magic—perhaps imprisoned in a tree —which will bring justice to pass automatically, with no other obligation upon us than from time to time to say the enchanting word.

VII
PARADISE LOST

VII

PARADISE LOST

THIS long poem of John Milton's is the noblest expression in English literature of what we like to call the modern spirit. It deals with the future—it is a vision, not a history. It gives us a dream of human beings, wise, loving and happy, in a world of double beauty, to satisfy both the mind and the heart. It has much to say of the relations of men and women—sex interest we call it nowadays—and it takes the tone of our own sophisticated age, stressing the comedy along with the romance of love and marriage. It presents life as an adventure in which liberty is as much an achievement as a privilege.

Paradise Lost is not a religious poem, except as all great art has something of the elevation and dignity of religion. The phrasing of the splendid lines has indeed a liturgical manner, but the subject is secular and the characters are quite human, no matter what exalted names they bear. Adam and Eve, Lucifer and the other fallen angels, Raphael, Gabriel, Michael and the good angels, and God—these are the persons of the drama. But the devils are not very devilish, nor the angels successfully angelic, and the portrait of God, by any standard, is inadequate.

Milton has given to none of his characters a

preoccupation with religion nor an interest in it, not even to the person he calls God; as you read through the poem you find yourself translating religious terms into your modern vocabulary of scientific morals. For God you substitute Energy or Electricity or Gravitation or what you will. For Worship or Reverence or Love you substitute your choice of Respect or Obedience, such as one must have for electricity or gravitation. Adam and Eve, the angels and the devils, all must reckon with these facts of life which Milton calls God. Of course there is nothing particularly loving or lovable about gravitation or electricity, and those readers who have complained that the Deity in *Paradise Lost* is unattractive or unkind have probably failed to notice what it is that Milton deifies. Adam and Eve, the angels and the devils, find God harmless and helpful so long as they understand and accept Him, but very awful when they get in His way.

The plot of the poem, like the characters, is secular in its interest. It owes something to the Book of Genesis, but less than you might suppose, unless you have recently compared the Bible with *Paradise Lost*. The creation story in the first chapter of Genesis says that man was formed of two sexes at the same time—"male and female created He them." Milton seems to find his ideal of human nature in this account, man and woman inseparable, each incomplete without the other. He takes his story, however, from the second chapter, which tells how Adam was created out of dust, how he named the animals and the birds, and tried in vain to find a satisfactory companion among them, and how Eve was created as an afterthought from one of his ribs.

The third chapter gives the account of man's fall. But the difference is as vast between the Bible stories and Milton's dramatic and psychological poem as between the Old Testament Samson and the hero of *Samson Agonistes*. In each case the poet imagines modern people and modern experience; though he happened to be a learned man, he had the good sense to let his art spring from life rather than from archæology.

To test the accuracy of these statements about *Paradise Lost* you have only to read the poem. But you will have to read all of it. If you stop at the end of the second book, you will know something about the devils, but little about the angels and nothing about Adam and Eve. We learn more about the angels in the third book, and Adam and Eve appear in the fourth. If you stop anywhere before the famous eating of the apple, you will know the romance and the grandeur of Milton's genius, but you will have missed his comic sense, or a large part of it, and you will probably fail to see what the poem is about. The story was a hard one to tell, as any writer will agree; the characters were few, and the incidents fewer. Moreover, the incidents might become ridiculous unless skilfully controlled. Milton's arrangement of his materials is masterly, and since the poem is constructed to make a single architectural impression, no fragmentary reading does it justice.

The structure of the plot is quite simple. The big emotional effects are produced after Adam and Eve have eaten the apple and know they must face the world outside of Eden. These effects are all made in the last three books. Milton's reason for postponing the apple until the ninth book was perhaps his fear that

the incident would strike us as trivial or funny, unless we were properly prepared for it. Whatever his purpose, this is the actual result. By the time we reach the forbidden tree, we are so deeply interested in the psychology of the man and the woman and of Lucifer, too, that even homely things can serve as a tragic temptation. But to keep us interested through nine preliminary books out of a total of twelve called for some ingenuity.

We first are shown Lucifer and his legions, thrown out of heaven and plotting in hell to spoil men's happiness. Though this section of the poem is only a footnote to the main subject, it is so splendidly told that in our schools the children are often asked to read no further in the epic—as though the rest would be an anticlimax.

Next, Raphael, the "sociable spirit," the "affable Archangel," is sent down to warn Adam and Eve of their peril. He arrives just about the moment that Lucifer enters the garden too, and it is with a sense of impending evil that we see man and woman in their ideal state of happiness, and listen to the archangel's account of the war in heaven and of the creation of the world. As soon as Raphael departs, Eve and Adam promptly do the evil he warned them against, and Michael comes to drive them out of Eden. But first he shows Adam a vision of world history—the long effect of sin. It is here that the poem becomes most modern, one might say most sceptical, for as Adam and the angel contemplate the civilization to be, they grow enthusiastic about it, and Adam wonders, at the climax of the poem, whether his disobedience was really disobedience after all, and whether he should regret it.

The hero of the poem is Adam and Eve, the complete man. When we see them first they are walking hand in hand, and hand in hand, at the end, they walk out of paradise. The posture is a symbol of that companionship which is Milton's theme. The tragedy for man is a break in that complementary relation; it is less the eating of the apple than Eve's desire to be alone which marks the entrance of evil into paradise. I know there are readers who call Lucifer the central figure in this great story; and splendid he certainly is, but Milton has drawn the man and the woman with more variety, and, as it seems to me, with much more emotional emphasis.

In the famous description of them in the fourth book he stresses their beauty and glorifies their bodies. Walt Whitman never approached Milton in the constant and eloquent praise of nakedness. Adam is handsome and Eve incomparably lovely, and both are aware of beauty. They can't be long out of each other's arms.

Historical reasons have been given for this bold praise of the animal basis of life. It is said that Milton wished to rebuke the *précieux* school which had transplanted itself from France to the Stuart court, and which unduly belittles the human body. If this is so, then Milton was doing what Whitman did later for American propriety—that is, he was trying to stamp out the nasty-mindedness which thinks better of legs if they are called limbs. But if we leave out all historical guesses and simply attend to the total effect of the poem, we shall probably conclude that the praise of the body harmonizes with Milton's view of life. His ideal is complete existence, complete development of body and soul, the employment for good ends of all

the faculties. No doubt he feels the charm of youth, the beauty of the maiden spirit, the mystic romance of the uninitiated mind. But in this poem he wrote of something else. Almost alone of English poets he presented the ideal life not as youth but as middle age, or at least as maturity. Anything which smacks of inexperience he parts with as lightly as the rest of us do with our milk teeth.

You might say that the plot he tells prevents him from portraying youth or courtship; Adam and Eve are created full grown. But this point seems weak, though scholars have made it. A poet can do what he likes with his plot, and if Milton had wished to show the man and the woman in the state of innocence which is identical with ignorance, he would have told his story that way. In fact, there was a well-established legend of Eden which postponed all experience of life till the temptation and fall. Milton preferred to make his paradise truly ideal, a picture of what man aspires to, not what he started from, and, intensely modern as he was he aspired to a life rich and mature, in all its offices honourable and free. He was far ahead of his time, and he is still somewhat ahead of ours. Most of our novels and plays still deal with adolescence and juvenilia. Even from Shakespeare you get a strong impression that life isn't worth reporting after the wedding day. Milton's man and woman are grown up.

The distinctions he makes between masculine and feminine psychology have roused the ladies, here and there, to protest; they say he makes Eve no more than an appendage to Adam; they say Adam is an infernal bore, lecturing his poor wife on things in general; they quote the line from the fourth book, "He for God only, she for God in him," and they conclude that

Milton belonged to the stone age and had no sense of humour.

Forget for a moment the Biblical connotation of these two characters, and watch the tragi-comedy from the fourth book on. Eve tells Adam how she felt when first she awoke from eternal sleep and saw the beautiful world—how she looked in the water, the primal mirror, and decided that she was beautiful too—and, wonder of wonders, how she beheld him, the climax of creation. If Adam is a gentleman, the least he can do is to recall, in turn, his own initial experiences—to agree that she is beautiful—to say what his emotions were when he saw woman. He does nothing of the kind, however. "Discipline must be maintained." He knew she was beautiful, and he was glad she was his, and he let it go at that.

> "He, in delight
> Both of her beauty and submissive charms,
> Smiled with superior love."

But when she isn't about he is ready to talk about her. Hasn't Milton caught the character fairly? When Raphael concludes his long account of the war in heaven and of creation, the audience, in the modern way, has a chance to ask questions, and Adam chiefly wishes to learn something about woman. He tells the angel, what he didn't tell Eve, his first impressions of life, his yearning for a rational companion, and certain disturbing facts about the companion he got. Though he asked for some one his equal, what he really wanted was a helpmate, a sort of assistant who would know her place. He admits that Eve has all the proper phrases of submission, but he has an uneasy notion that she doesn't really think she is much beneath him

in the scale of things, and, worst of all, though he knows he is her superior, when he is in her presence he doesn't feel so. He asks the angel what is wrong with this supposedly perfect world. The lines in which the question is put, perhaps because of the ironic and comic in them, convey the loveliest sense of feminine charm in our language.

> " Well I understood in the prime end
> Of Nature her the inferior, in the mind
> And inward faculties, which most excel;
> In outward also her resembling less
> His image who made both, and less expressing
> The character of that dominion given
> O'er other creatures. Yet when I approach
> Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
> And in herself so complete, so well to know
> Her own, that what she wills to do or say
> Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best."

The one explanation that Adam can offer, as he raises the question, is that when God took that rib from him, He took more than was strictly necessary, and so disturbed the ideal balance for ever. The angel, however, manages to keep a straight face, and tells him not to blame Nature, but to act out his fate in the world as it is.

From this point in the story Milton departs widely from the account in Genesis, and the effect is to develop our respect for Eve's superior wisdom, and for that magnanimity which Adam wondered at, her " greatness of mind." She insists on walking in the garden alone. The reasons she gives are feminine—that is, to the male, unintelligible, but the poet sees to it that we sympathize with her. Adam didn't want solitude, but, after a good deal of Adam, she does.

Then the serpent approached with his arguments to

tempt her. After all, an angel, even though fallen, is a better judge of beauty than man, and at sight of Eve Satan almost repented. For a moment he was "abstracted from his own evil," and remained "stupidly good." Though he carried through the temptation by sheer will power, he didn't enjoy it. And as Milton reports the incident, it wasn't Satan's argument that persuaded her. Womanlike, she lets fall the true reason for her conduct after she has eaten the apple; she intended to acquire all the knowledge it contained, and to keep the fruit to herself, in order to get even with Adam for his lectures. She would like to be his equal, beyond question, or even—"a thing not undesirable"—his superior. But the dark thought presents itself that if death is the punishment for eating, and if she alone die, God might very well create another woman for Adam. That settles it. Adam must eat the apple too.

Of course she lies about it when she offers him the apple. I leave it to a misogynist to say that her policy was feminine. "Dear husband, I made this experiment for your sake, and I find that a growing divinity in me, not death, is the effect. Just think how sad I should be if you should not become divine too—if you allowed me to remain in this melancholy and unnatural superiority!"

Though Adam is not subtle, he has a certain crude honesty, poor man, and his reply to Eve shows him at his best, her faithful lover. Death will surely follow, he says, but if so, he will not live without her. "If I thought death would be the consequence," says Eve, "of course I would never permit you to eat the apple."

Whatever advantage Adam has here in our sym-

pathies, he loses it as soon as the doom is pronounced and he sees his paradise lost. Not even Falstaff at his most eloquent could think of such gorgeous curses as man pours on woman. Eve lets them go unchallenged. She is thinking, in a most unorthodox way, of what has troubled all generous sceptics in the old creation story —she is astounded, not that she should be punished, but that her descendants to the end of time should suffer for the sin they never did commit. Nothing could be more modern, nothing further from ecclesiastical doctrine, than her wonderful speech to her angry man. "Though God has said it," she begins, "it is unjust that any others should suffer for our disobedience, least of all our own children. Obviously, then, we must have no children. Our sin and its consequences must die with us, and God may create other men and women, if He wishes, out of the innocent dust. But if you think —as I do—that it would be hard not to have children, passionate lovers that we are, then the honourable thing is to commit suicide. We are to die anyway; why not die for a generous purpose?"

Though Adam admires the proposal, it leaves him somewhat cold. He doesn't know enough about death yet, he says, to be sure that suicide is no worse than a natural end of life. And even under the curse life isn't so bad! He begins to find an interest in the new problem of toil, food, warmth, shelter—in fact, in the new prospect of civilization. We are getting close to the end of the poem, with its inconsistent but convincing zest for the modern world.

It frequently happens in great imaginative literature that the sincerity of the writer, carried along by this theme, makes him say something he had not intended. In philosophy or theology the result might not be happy,

but in poetry we almost always vote it a masterpiece. If *Paradise Lost* were a theological essay, as from its first lines it promises to be, then the ending would seem grotesque and perhaps blasphemous, but as a poem of human life it grows firmer and more persuasive from book to book, until we wonder if Milton remembered how the work began. Theologically, to be put out of paradise was a terrible loss. Humanly speaking, to get out of that quiet life into the great world was a privilege.

Theologically, death is the punishment for sin, but humanly speaking death may come at the end of a long and full life as a kindly rest, and many an old age has so welcomed it. It is Milton the poet speaking when God says that he has invented death as a " remedy " for human sorrow. And in the vision of the future which Michael unfolds to Adam there is philosophical confusion, but extraordinary truth to human sentiment. When he sees death by illness and senility, and learns that even with the health which temperance gives one must leave behind gradually youth, strength, beauty, the use of the faculties—he exclaims that life isn't worth living. Michael replies :

> " Nor love thy life, nor hate, but what thou livest
> Live well."

The answer is famous because it puts so clearly the stoic philosophy of most human beings. Of course the archangel ought not to have a stoic philosophy. Dante might not think much of the reply, as coming from one who had attained beatitude.

The vision of war, of human society in frivolous and ignoble peace, makes Adam penitent anew for his disobedience, but the sight of the patriarchs and the saints, and the prophecy of Christ, naturally awaken his

gratitude and his enthusiasm. He is rather glad he disobeyed.

> " Full of doubt I stand
> Whether I should repent me now of sin
> By me done and occasioned, or rejoice
> Much more that much more good thereof shall spring."

Milton likes his man and woman too much—especially his woman—to treat them with the severity his story seemed to promise, and the mercy which softens the picture has little resemblance to the idea of God's pardon; it is rather a cordial affection for some people who didn't do anything very bad, after all. Or only what married folk have duplicated many a time since, and in the odour of sanctity. Adam loves Eve but doesn't quite understand her, and at last he gets a little on her nerves. She loves him, but resents the tactless domineering of the male. She goes in for freedom, and they both end in difficulties. They do recover, however, their comradeship, their sense of interdependence, and this blessed result is worth all their troubles. Such a summary would seem out of harmony if we were paraphrasing the Bible; it is fair to Milton, whose secular genius takes us far from Genesis.

For many readers Satan, not Adam and Eve, is the hero of the poem. He is a rebel against absolute authority, and so invites our sympathy. Our emotions, if not our conduct, gravitate towards the idea of liberty. Of course we should waste little sympathy on Lucifer if we translate the term God into the laws, physical and chemical, which operate in the universe. Lucifer proposing to fight it out with gravitation would be less sublime than ridiculous. I think Milton wished to present Satan in just such a light, as a miracle of idiotic pride.

But difficulties presented themselves—difficulties which spring from the human imagination. It is the central idea of modern æsthetics that what you can say in art is limited by psychological laws in the mind of the audience. It isn't so simple as we might suppose to say, and be understood to say, what we mean. For this reason the philosopher and the theologian, like the mathematician, try to keep abstract ideas in abstract terms. Infinite good and infinite evil, they know, are rational, logical and just, so long as they remain in the realm of infinity, but if you deal with such ideas in finite terms they will probably play tricks on you—the evil may seem admirable, and the good very bad indeed. But the poetic imagination in each of us likes nothing better than to dramatize all ideas in persons, giving the abstraction a local habitation and a name. It is not surprising that theological formulas usually suffer when a poet, even with the best intentions, takes them in hand.

For a simple illustration:

If I say that God is universal law, perhaps the definition will be satisfactory, as far as it goes. Now if my physical condition is reduced to the receptive point, and I happen to meet a germ, I am sure to contract a disease—all in the way of law and order. Since these particular laws are in the realm of biology, it will make no difference whether I am a good man or a bad one—I have pneumonia just the same. But we like to think of God also as a person, and we can't imagine an infinite person. Before we know it, we are thinking of Him as a neighbour of ours, a just judge, a wise ruler, who punishes the wicked and honours the good. The next step is to find the universe dropping from under us,

when the obviously good man suffers like anyone else from the impartial biological law. The finite personal God then seems careless or malign.

As I read the poem, Lucifer is not the hero, but a splendid slip in æsthetics. He is meant to be the proud spirit fighting against inexorable law, and therefore foolish, but from time to time Milton personifies the law, and at once Lucifer has our sympathy.

The two treatments alternate more or less, and the reader will find it profitable to observe the changes. The finest instance of what seems Milton's intention occurs in the fourth book, where Satan enters paradise and curses not God but the sun. He thinks of himself as a light-bearer, and can tolerate no rival. This defiance of the sun is as mad as anything in *Don Quixote*, and the perversity of it is truly devilish. The desire to be different goes to an insane but logical end; if two and two make four, then for Lucifer they will make five. If gravitation pushes or pulls down, then for him it will always push up. If the sun shines by day, then he will look for light in darkness. "Evil, be thou my good!" This it is, to reign in hell.

If Milton had been able to maintain this treatment of the idea of evil, perhaps his poem would have been one of the philosophical masterpieces of the world. The place where Lucifer most gets out of hand, philosophically speaking, is great poetry, and I'm glad we have it, but I know it has nothing to do with the Prince of Darkness. It is an encounter between a single warrior and a whole army—abstractions all, who suddenly become persons to my imagination. Of course the sympathy goes to the single champion. Two lesser angels find Satan in Eden, and start to arrest him. He

proudly asks to face the authority which commands them.

> " If I must contend,
> Best with the best—the sender, not the sent."

They lead him to Gabriel and the angelic squadrons and a conversation follows in which Satan has much the best of it. Gabriel wants him to return to hell and stay there. Satan reminds him, naturally, that if heaven couldn't keep him in hell before, the threat is idle. If, however, Gabriel can take Lucifer captive at any time, he ought to do so at once. Gabriel accepts the challenge, and the infinite squadron of angels begins to surround Satan. In the midst stands Satan, undaunted. Of course he's a hero, for the time being.

Milton's limitations in handling abstract ideas serve to define his genius. He belonged to an age of scientific speculation and discovery; he was only a little later than Bacon, and we think he knew Galileo, whom he mentioned in the poem. He gives us that modern view of life in which the laws of society and of morality try to identify themselves with the laws of the universe. In a world of law, happiness is reached only through obedience. In such a world, also, freedom is achieved only by understanding and accepting the laws. Lucifer wants freedom, as man wants happiness, but carrying his defiance of law to an infinite extreme, he becomes hopelessly mad. If he could have accepted the sun, he would have remained at peace in the presence of God.

This is the meaning of the great poem, I think, for readers to-day. It has many other claims on our affection. Like all old masterpieces, it charms by much which is not of our time, much that we don't quite

understand. We wonder if anyone ever spoke in that exalted, liturgical style, whether the odd and beautiful words which arrest us, here and there, ever belonged to common speech, whether the rhythm of the verse, long and rolling, is English rhythm at all, or Milton's conception of the sound of Virgil's lines, on ancient Latin lips. It makes little difference; the things we ask about are part of the charm of time—a patina. And perhaps we like the poem for the portrait the poet gives of himself. He was blind, and the loss of his sight in middle life weighed upon him, and compelled him to say something of his affliction, as though we were in the room with him, and he felt it more courteous to speak of it than to pretend we didn't know. For this information we need go to no biography; he has said it all in the great passages at the beginning of the third book and the beginning of the seventh. When he tells us what he misses, he gives a list of the things loved in the visible world—the seasons, the flowers, the flocks, the herds, the beauty of man and woman, the human face divine. These are the glories of life in the Eden which Adam and Eve knew, and they serve once more to define the directions of his ideals.

He loved all the good things of life. He was out of sympathy with the Puritans because their taste was so bad. They ate and drank heartily, but without art. When Eve sets out a meal for Raphael, the poet says she arranged the courses in a harmony for the palate. And he seems to think that men of all good-will and sound intelligence—for him an essential addition—might at last solve the problems of the world, using the laws by which it moves. So we might bring back Eden. But when he talks of paradise, as when he speaks of

the love of men and women, he likes first of all to keep his feet on the ground. To learn the law, we must start with the facts.

> "To know
> That which before us lies in daily life,
> Is the prime wisdom."

VIII
THE WAVERLEY NOVELS

VIII

THE WAVERLEY NOVELS

Scott gave us the historical novel in a splendour never equalled. He imagined strong characters in important scenes, gave them noble adventures, and through them interpreted the romantic charm of some moment of history. With the poet's mood and the antiquary's thoroughness he visualized the past—not one section of it, one level of society in it, but the whole range of man's doings at a given time, from the palace to the hovel. In the field of romance which he opened, his disciples—Dumas and Fenimore Cooper, to name no smaller men—could move at ease without crossing each other's path. Furthermore, by applying to contemporary life the antiquarian method of detail, he became the father of modern realism, the teacher of Balzac. When they planned the *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge was to make the world of fancy seem real, and Wordsworth was to unveil in the commonplace the gleam of romance. What was premeditated collaboration in the two great poets was native single-mindedness in Scott, who at once made stable the vague reputations and floating lights of history, and set free the poetry in common men and familiar things. So should fiction be written, Europe decided in the astonishing success of the Waverley Novels; and though many a good man since has found his own way of writing, yet over him,

even against his wish, one half or the other of Scott's genius still presides.

To write fiction as Scott wrote it, is almost to write history. For the historian he was in some sense a teacher. In several corrections of old errors he forestalled the professional student, as when in *Woodstock* he anticipated Carlyle's sympathetic reinterpretation of Cromwell. He reminded us all—what the history writers occasionally forget—that the past is a series of events, not a philosophy nor an argument, and to write history, try as we may, we cannot avoid telling a story. But this chief lesson to the historian was in the use of local—and shall we say temporal—colour. His novels showed even the mere chronicler how to catch the peculiar features of any time and any place. Many of his readers, we must suppose, had been bred in a philosophy which skipped lightly from the present back to a fabulous state of nature, where the flight of time was as yet unobserved, and where there was no more local colour than in Eden. Other readers of his held a doctrine which skipped with equal dexterity from the present back to a no less fabulous state of civilization, in which the Rousseau state of nature was as yet unpreached. It was something of an achievement for a novelist to teach either of these schools anything. But while the later followers of Godwin and Burke were still making capital out of their respective kinds of golden age, Scott taught his readers to like the past for what it was. If times, like men, have a right to their own individuality, he restored to each moment of the past its self-respect.

The secret of his insight into the past was the secret of that understanding of men which made him seem blood-brother to every one he met. We might call it

sympathy, except that the word suggests only an instinct of the heart, whereas his sympathy with the past was also studied and reasoned. The peculiarities of a society, he recognized, are like the customs of a family or the habits of a person; they are conventions or "conveniences," and they are the outward signs of peculiar needs. If it is rigorous etiquette in some remote Cranford-like village to offer your guests no feast more elaborate than tea and bread and butter, below the convention may lie a rigorous poverty. The student of manners, therefore, will find nothing astonishing, and certainly nothing ludicrous, in what is strange to his time and to his locality, for in the vast panorama of human oddities which we call history, the wise may trace the upgrowth of intimate and sacred human needs. Some conventions, of course, surviving the need that begot them, become traditional; perhaps only a few at one moment are contemporary and vital. Scott was far too intelligent not to discriminate between the two kinds. He treats with indulgent humour those peculiarities which in any age ride on the momentum of behaviour, but the vital conventions he studies with a superb seriousness. His sympathy is contagious. As we read, we feel not the private emotions of the author but the public sentiment proper to ancient scenes and days; we not only see and understand discarded ways and forgotten habits, but we share the desires that created them; we cease to be of a party, and fall in love with the race; our allegiance is both to Elizabeth and to Mary Queen of Scots; we put on the fanaticism of the Covenanter, the loyalty of the Cavalier.

This, in general, is what we owe to a hundred years of the Waverley Novels—a broadening and ennobling of the art of fiction, a reading of the human past at

once more intelligent and more kind. But even if we elaborated these comments, we should still be on the fringe of our theme. It is a poor honour to Scott to treat his books as mere historical events. Their importance is less in what they have given us than in the influence they still exert—or might exert—upon novel-readers.

I say "might exert"; for here and there a person not otherwise ill-educated will tell you that Scott's day is past; that he has no message for modernity; that if you are to enjoy his stories, you must begin in childhood, before you know better. A disciple of Scott with a sympathetic interest in strange human phenomena cannot ignore these unhappy folk, nor is it to Scott's advantage that they should be ignored. They say that he simply spins a yarn, and in a tiresome, old-fashioned way; that he touches—however brilliantly, if you insist upon it—only the surface of life; that even granting his high spirit, we must call him shallow at last, for with all his eye for appearances he is blind to the problems beneath and indifferent to the solutions wiser men than he proposed; that in an age when Wordsworth illustrated plain living and high thinking, and Byron dealt the first telling blow at smug propriety, and Shelley was a voice for the oppressed, Walter Scott was collecting old armour and turning a mediocre farm into a medieval hostelry, to his financial ruin at the time and to his discredit with thoughtful men ever since. I hope I do not overstate the charge against Scott. At least it is clear that his critics wish he had been as intellectual as Wordsworth, or Byron, or Shelley, or as sorry for society as Thomas Hardy or H. G. Wells. Even Scott's admirers will sometimes imply that nine-tenths of his genius is crass amiability. A year ago

I was discussing with another teacher of literature the two sermons Scott wrote for the Rev. Huntly Gordon. "I can just imagine the sort of sermon Scott would write, can't you?" said my friend with a smile. I doubt if he could. Apparently he did not know that Scott was a thinker, in some ways, I shall go so far as to assert, a deep thinker.

Those who have difficulty in coming at his mind, at the sane, the grave and the premeditated philosophy that has saturated the Waverley Novels, should remind themselves of the elementary difference between a story and an essay. Scott tells a story. His art, as they say in books, is objective. His meditation upon life is done before the novel begins; the novel is the result of it, not the process. After a long course of philosophizing in the modern stories of avowed thoughtfulness, no wonder that Scott seems objective, reticent, discreet. But the discreet man is not necessarily without a philosophy. A novelist, moreover, like other people, can disclose his philosophy in two ways; he can frankly talk it out with you, in which case he is on the verge of being an essayist, or he can imply it in the characters he chooses and in their fortunes and behaviour. Of course, not every objective manner has a philosophy behind it; I doubt if much brooding on the universe is at the bottom of *Treasure Island* or of other Stevenson tales, glorious as they are. To make a conscious selection of life, and to let that selection speak for itself, has been, after all, the way of only the greatest poets. But I wish to urge that it is Scott's way. Since we have neither Homer's note-book nor Shakespeare's diary, we may doubt whether their wisdom was the fruit of experience and thought, or of a miraculous chance. In Walter Scott's journal, however, and in

his letters, he who is not too lazy may read the explicit philosophy which the novels imply. It can hardly be found in Scott's early poems; it begins with *Waverley*—with the second third of *Waverley*. The significance of the mislaid manuscript is to my mind that in the nine years between the loss and the recovery of it Scott ceased merely to tell romantic stories, and began to think.

His philosophy is, in a word, stoicism—the noblest way of life, he calls it in his journal. He lavished a passionate enthusiasm on whatever he could bring to pass, or could prevent, or could modify; but whatever lay beyond his control he refused to consider important, and cultivated indifference towards it. A strong man, he thought, must be the complete captain of his soul. In the catastrophe of his own fortunes, finding himself ruined, he practised this discipline with success; the bad luck which he could not help, he laughed off, but he spent himself prodigally where effort could avail. Stoicism had already been his daily philosophy for years, and he bestowed it, as by right of birth, on all the high-spirited men in his novels. Like himself, they all show a fervid love of living combined singularly with a small love of life. Stevenson's fine essay on this attitude is but a rendering of Scott's ideas, sometimes of his very phrase. It is in *The Pirate*, for example, not in *Aes Triplex*, that the typical passage first occurred—"The deck, the battle-field are hardly more fatal to us than our table and our bed; and we are saved from the one, merely to drag out a heartless and wearisome existence till we perish at the other." Scott's heroes all take this attitude towards death. Vehemently as they live, they face with a sudden and surprising resignation what-

ever seems to be inexorable doom; yet upon the slightest chance of escape, their passion to live as suddenly returns. Part of this temperament Fenimore Cooper adapted to his own purposes in Leather-stocking. Natty Bumpo, however, has only the resignation to the inevitable; he never has the immense joy in living that characterizes Scott's men.

It is not remarkable, of course, that Scott had a philosophy. Every good citizen at the end of the eighteenth century had a key to the universe and a recipe for forming character. It is to Scott's credit that he heard with respect all of this omniscience that came his way, and equally to his credit that he disagreed with most of it. Some of the theories which he rejected have increased in popularity though not in soundness even to our own day. One attractive formula held climate or soil responsible for character. Wordsworth, though refining upon it, preached this elementary fatalism. He taught that nature played upon us, with or without our will, and in proportion as we were sensitive, moulded us to her pattern. In one lovely illustration, the famous poem beginning "Three years she grew in sun and shower," he claimed that the excellences of the child Lucy had been called out by favourable aspects of the landscape; the trees, the mountains, the waterfall, the clouds and the stars, were the causes of her spiritual, even of her physical beauty. It is obviously agreeable to give nature all this credit, if nature will only do all this work. It is also satisfactory to have nature to blame, if the result is less than we desire. If evil appears in us, we may at least suspect that we got into the wrong kind of landscape. Wordsworth's poem *Ruth* tells of a poor woman long deserted by her husband. That young man had been living in a vague region in the

southern part of the United States, where the vegetation, the contour of the landscape, even the appearance of the sky, were luxuriant and lawless, and their wild pervading influence was bad for a youth already disposed to be wayward. We infer that had he spent the same amount of time in the New England landscape he would not have left his wife. Fortunately Wordsworth's greatness is independent of his theories. His fame rests secure upon his unapproachable sensitiveness to the beauty of the world we live in, and upon his exquisite knowledge of some portions of the human heart. He taught us to feel; he was not pre-eminently equipped to be a philosopher, and his theory seems now to some of us as vacuous as once it seemed to his reviewers. If it were true, then to save our souls we ought to look up a good place in a descriptive geography, and go and live there. Wordsworth would add that the best places are in Cumberland and Westmorland.

I have dwelt on this doctrine, as stated by Wordsworth, not for the purpose of ridiculing it, but because the admirer of Wordsworth is often among those who can discover no great mentality in Scott, no serious disposition towards the great ideas of his time. This particular great idea Scott saw through without difficulty. He would see through it to-day as it survives in the invincible pessimism of Thomas Hardy. He observed that the Lake Country did make poets out of Wordsworth and Coleridge and Southey, who were poets already, but that their farming neighbours, curiously enough, remained just farmers. He saw also that goodness and badness, instead of being geographically stationed respectively in the north-western part of England and in that vague southern part of the United States, take up their residence everywhere on pretty equal terms.

Against this passive theory of character-growth he set his own active principle, that not where men are, but what they do, determines what they will become. He would have us observe that lawyers everywhere tend to be alike, book-keepers and bank clerks conform to a type, clergymen and soldiers wear the impress of their professions. I think he would have us observe also that he loved and admired Wordsworth. He was one of the first worshippers at Dove Cottage; he held Wordsworth's genius in many ways unsurpassed; and he said finely of Sir George Beaumont that "he understood Wordsworth's poetry, which is a rare thing, for it is more easy to see his peculiarities than to feel his great merit, or to follow his abstract ideas." Yet Scott agreed with Lamb's wish that the hero of the *Excursion* had been a pilgrim instead of a pedlar, for peddling has never been an effective recipe for dilating the soul. When the critic Jeffrey, however, objected to the imaginative strain in Matthew, the schoolmaster, Scott sided with Wordsworth, since there is no reason why schoolmastering should not sometimes generate an imagination.

These opinions are culled from Scott's journal; they are also implied in the novels. His heroes, not unnaturally, take his point of view instead of Wordsworth's. They enjoy fine scenery, but neither seek it nor avoid it; they possess their souls apart from it. On the other hand, they are extremely wary about their choice of a profession. Sometimes they enter the counting-house or study law, to please their fathers, but they always seize the first chance of escape. Business men they often admire, but never business, for buying and selling is doubtful exercise of the soul. They like soldiering and travel and reading, they dislike the tyranny of a martinet and the detail of a pedant. Most of all, they desire to

engage in a generous public cause. Like Scott himself, they answer any call of duty, but of their own choice they would undertake no work that cramps the faculties or limits the horizon.

It was a peculiarity of Scott, no necessary part of his philosophy, that he was interested in characters already formed. The process of their forming he never studied at length; he took none of his heroes from their cradle to their first or second marriage, in the way of *Pendennis* or *David Copperfield*. His young men, his Waverleys and Frank Osbaldistones, are never the master-figures of the scene, though we are confident they will be when they cease to be callow. Moreover, there are few children in the Waverley Novels, and those few of little importance. But Rob Roy, Bailie Nicol Jarvie, Balfour, Jeanie Deans, Norna of the Fitful Head, and their like, and all the great historical persons, have achieved their characters and become in a sense absolute; if they often suggest and promise revelations, it is such as the drama rather than time unfolds. Indeed, Scott is at heart a dramatist; he likes to muster his people and exhibit them all in a single crisis, and he wants them to have accumulated a store of character for him to reveal. Logically enough, he had no use for the doctrine of human perfectability, as Rousseau, Godwin and Shelley more or less held it. A prospect of perfection would have prevented him from regarding character as fixed and ultimate, and he would not dream of perfecting the race merely by adjusting social conditions, for the intrinsic effect of certain kinds of work, in his opinion, could not be changed. Let your pedlar go about in a motor-car, if you please; his work is but peddling still, and no man can escape the mark of the work he does. Scott thought it undesirable that he should escape; he

thought it a noble morality that character should be, not a prospect, but a result. If you asked, what of the men who have no choice in their occupation, he would, I think, admit that you had touched the heart of social misery and had pressed his doctrine hard. But he would say that every man intelligent enough to grasp this philosophy can choose the most liberating work open to him, and if his choice must be narrow, he often can import into his daily task some qualities of a larger profession. As to his own life, Scott would remind us finally, if we may trust a page of the journal, that he had little use for the artistic or literary character. Its self-conceit, super-sensitiveness and jealousies he despised. His wish was to be a soldier. In the circumstances that made him first a lawyer, then a poet, and then a novelist, he gave his work as far as possible a soldierly quality, in order to save his character. He cultivated regularity and discipline, neatness of dress and courtesy of bearing, and a most unliterary reticence about his private affairs.

This consideration of Scott's interest in character as a finished product, as the result of a definite work, would be incomplete if we did not carry it a little further into the novels themselves. We must realize what it meant to his art to treat the persons in his stories as so many absolute terms. He cuts himself off deliberately from what the modern reviewer calls "character development." He puts his men and women in one situation after another, to show us what they are, and our knowledge of them is thereby increased, but in themselves there is neither growth nor change; the last thing we learn about them is consistent with all that went before. Unlike Peter Bell or the Ancient Mariner, they experience no change of heart. They receive some such development,

if you choose, as the camera-plate undergoes in the bath, but though the impression is made visible gradually, there is but one picture from first to last. Scott never discussed this method of his, so far as I know, but it is quite evident that he employed it, and it is easy to supply the reason. Though we may hold a charitable faith that some magic, some conversion, may alter men's character, yet we rarely act on this faith, and we find it practically impossible to envisage character so. The unexpected good that our friends accomplished we immediately connect with former hints and prophecies of good in them; the most shocking evils, unfortunately, we likewise read back into our acquaintance, and wonder we did not foresee them all along. So preposterous is it to our logic of human nature that a man should be not one person but two or more, that a story such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is always thought of as a *tour de force*. Scott was as much aware as the rest of us of the mysteries of the heart, of the unforeseen and the capricious in even familiar personalities, but he was certain that so far as any character is known, it is all of one piece. We get the impression from occasional entries in the journal that he thought character once fixed had greater possibilities for the novelist than if it were fluid and mutable. He liked the curious combinations, the wild juxtapositions, that only life itself can invent. In time's kaleidoscope even the dullest of us get into significant or brilliant parts of the pattern; it would be a waste of bewilderment if the colours themselves should change. Furthermore, the fixed character is somewhat like a constant virtue or vice; it is interesting to see what company it gets into, what sympathy or contrast, in its progress through the world. In *The Heart of Midlothian,* Jeanie Deans resolves to walk from Scotland to

London, to see the queen in person, and to ask a pardon for her sister, who is condemned to be hanged. This was a true story, and the actual heroine had been much honoured in Scotland for her devotion, but Scott is careful not to idealize her. In the book Jeanie Deans is of a strong upright character but without genius or tact, with no sudden inspiration to assist her when in the presence of the queen. She is the same person in London that she was in Edinburgh. It fascinated Scott to bring together two such persons as Jeanie and Queen Caroline, and see what their interplay of character would be, what telling chance remarks the girls would make, how much the great lady could divine of the peasant's sorrow. It is not hard to guess what a modern romancer would have done with the scene, by way of showing the natural superiority of the lower classes. As a matter of fact, Scott indicates that Jeanie is morally the queen's superior, but at the same time he recognizes the advantages in social adroitness a queen has over a country girl.

In *Quentin Durward*, for another example, when King Louis appoints Quentin to guard the entrance to the royal room, an inexperienced romancer would be tempted to make the young Scotsman's fortune by his diligence. But though otherwise admirable, Quentin is not very alert, and he has already a series of blunders to his discredit. Scott therefore lets him make one blunder more, and for a time lose the king's favour. Such illustrations can be multiplied from all his novels. One last and more elaborate one from *Old Mortality* gathers up all that I have said of the stoicism of Scott's characters, of their development from their occupation, and of their absolute fixity. The scene brings together the young hero of the book, Morton, with Claverhouse,

the daredevil cavalry leader, and Mucklewrath, a fanatical Cameronian. It would be hard to match the violent shift of fortune which in a moment or so assays the three strong characters by the prospect of death. Morton has just been captured by the Cameronians, who promptly vote to kill him. As it is Sunday, they postpone the execution till midnight. Mucklewrath, tired of waiting for the clock, jumps on a chair to push the hands along. At that moment Claverhouse and his dragoons sweep down the road, kill most of the Cameronians, and lead out the rest to be shot. The really tremendous suspense and the melodramatic relief of the scene would have satisfied most story-tellers. For Scott it was only the prelude to a series of fine effects. The imperturbable Claverhouse, having ordered the execution of the Cameronians, called for something to eat, and invited the liberated Morton, who was somewhat unstrung by his peril and sudden escape, to pledge him in a horn of ale. Morton raised the cup and was about to drink, "when the discharge of carabines beneath the window, followed by a deep and hollow groan, repeated twice or thrice, and more faint at each interval, announced the fate of the three men who had just left them. Morton shuddered and set down his untasted cup.

" 'You are but young in these matters, Mr. Morton,' said Claverhouse, after he had composedly finished his draught, 'and I do not think the worse of you as a young soldier for appearing to feel them acutely. But habit, duty, and necessity reconcile men to everything.'

" 'I trust,' said Morton, 'they will never reconcile me to such sights as these.'

" 'You would hardly believe,' said Claverhouse in reply, 'that in the beginning of my military career I

had as much aversion to seeing blood spilt as ever man felt; it seemed to me to be wrung from my own heart. But in truth, Mr. Morton, why should we care so much for death, light upon us or around us whenever it may? Men die daily; not a bell tolls the hour but it is the death note of someone or other; and why hesitate to shorten the span of others, or take over-anxious care to prolong our own? It is all a lottery. When the hour of midnight came, you were to die; it has struck, you are alive and safe, and the lot has fallen on those fellows who were to murder you. . . . When I think of death . . . as a thing worth thinking of, it is in the hope of pressing one day some well-fought and hard-won field of battle, and dying with the shout of victory in my ear; *that* would be worth dying for, and more, it would be worth living for.'

" At the moment when he delivered these sentiments, his eye glancing with the martial enthusiasm which formed such a prominent feature in his character, a gory figure, which seemed to rise out of the floor of the apartment, stood upright before him. . . . His face, where it was not covered with blood-streaks, was ghastly pale, for the hand of death was on him. He bent upon Claverhouse eyes in which the grey light of insanity still twinkled, though just about to flit for ever, and exclaimed . . . ' Wilt thou trust in thy bow and in thy spear, in thy steed and in thy banner? And shall not God visit thee for innocent blood? Wilt thou glory in thy wisdom, and in thy courage, and in thy might? And shall not the Lord judge thee? . . . Thou, who hast partaken of the wine-cup of fury, and hast been drunken and mad because thereof, the wish of thy heart shall be granted to thy loss, and the hope of

thine own pride shall destroy thee. I summon thee . . . to appear before the tribunal of God, to answer for this innocent blood, and the seas besides which thou hast shed.'

"He drew his right hand across his bleeding face, and held it up to heaven as he uttered these words, which he spoke very loud, and then added more faintly, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge the blood of thy saints!'

"As he uttered the last word he fell backwards without an attempt to save himself, and was a dead man ere his head touched the floor.

"Morton was much shocked at this extraordinary scene and the prophecy of the dying man, which tallied so strangely with the wish which Claverhouse had just expressed; and he often thought of it afterwards when that wish seemed to be accomplished. Two of the dragoons who were in the apartment, hardened as they were, and accustomed to such scenes, showed great consternation at the sudden apparition, the event, and the words which preceded it. Claverhouse alone was unmoved. At the first instant of Mucklewrath's appearance he had put his hand to his pistol, but, on seeing the situation of the wounded wretch, he immediately withdrew it, and listened with great composure to his dying exclamation.

"When he dropped, Claverhouse asked in an unconcerned tone of voice—'How came the fellow here?'" . . .

I spoke some pages back of the fatalism which Fenimore Cooper extracted from Scott's store of philosophy. In Leatherstocking, however, we find no notion of fate that Scott would have subscribed to, though there might seem to be every reason why he,

like Leatherstocking, should have been a fatalist or determinist. At the end of the eighteenth century the Rousseau influence permeated the thinking of most young men with the idea that responsibility for conduct should be assumed by nature, by institutions, by society —in other words, that our fate is determined for us. Our morality somehow got mixed up with our environment. Character became so generally defined in terms of climate or soil that Godwin found it necessary to argue the matter, Wordsworth educed his morals from the vernal wood, and Coleridge and Shelley, though less extreme, found at least an authority for the soul in the aspects of nature. Such a theory, even when crudely stated, still fascinates us, and in the utterance of these great geniuses it was accompanied by wonderful observations and appreciations of the visible world, which are still valid, no matter what we think of the theory. But this fascinating supine faith, which allowed the sceptical to rest on nature instead of on God, and permitted the deist to rest on God in nature, was a bad preparation for the coming shock of evolutionary science. Young men brought up in this attitude were one day, like Tennyson, to stand aghast at the discovery that nature, red in tooth and claw, is careless of our morality. We are accustomed to say that in *In Memoriam* science collides with religion, but it is with religion as moulded by Rousseau, by Wordsworth, and by Shelley—three strange figures among the Fathers; or rather it is a collision less between religion and science than between a sentimental and a matter-of-fact apprehension of nature.

Probably no one will object if I say that Scott could not have written *In Memoriam*. I do not refer to the

difference between his poetic gift and Tennyson's. But Scott held a view of nature for which even full-fledged Darwinism would have afforded no terrors. He took the position of most scientific philosophers, as I understand, to-day, that nature represents a system of cause and effect, quite independent of man and his fate; that when we conform to its system we are safe, and when we transgress it we are in trouble; that moral good and evil is man's contribution to outward nature; that though a man may well prefer a moral end which trangresses this outward nature, and may be lost for it, yet we should remember that nature is impersonal and took no part in the choice. With a great love of the inanimate world, and sensible of the charm of the doctrines which swayed his contemporaries, Scott deliberately emphasized, not the sympathy between men and nature, but that very gulf between them which troubled the poet of *In Memoriam*. He even used that gulf for literary effect; by means of it he converted all landscape, no matter how various, into a rhetorical aid, a further means of expression for his characters. If the sower is in his field, the field expresses him; and if the sower visits the city and walks the avenue embarrassed and out of place, the city street by its contrast also expresses him. Is not Di Vernon all the more herself because we find her in the Highlands, a stranger among her coarse and illiterate cousins? In deeper things, however, than these matters of technique, Scott built upon this separation of nature and man. He resolutely set himself against any confusion of matter and soul; he trained himself against mysticism; he feared danger even in the enthusiasm of evangelical religion, and in his own devotions, he says, he cultivated a detached calmness, to keep his head clear.

For the responsibility which he had withdrawn from nature, he believed he must himself assume.

If Scott had been a special student of Greek literature, this doctrine of fate, even though his contemporaries did not hold it, would not have been surprising in him, for this is the very temper of Sophocles or Euripides. But his days and nights since childhood had been given to the old ballads, which fairly reek of superstitions, curses and hauntings, and to the old romances, no less full of charms, magic and expiations. In this body of literature fate is a destiny outside of us—a doom, often undeserved, which overtakes us. It is no small evidence of the force of Scott's mind that in serving himself from this rich material he made over its spirit until it reflects a very different philosophy of fate. To illustrate such a point in full would take hours, but two of the Waverley Novels fortunately may be used to show what idea of fate lay in Scott's sources, and what philosophy emerged in his completed work.

The *Bride of Lammermoor* was dictated while he was seriously ill, in great pain. The dictation was almost automatic; his genius in this case did indeed simply spin a yarn. After his recovery, when the printed book was in his hands, he found to his horror that he could not remember a word of it. Of course he remembered the original legends on which he had founded the story, but what he had done with the material he could not recall. He was greatly relieved by the reflection, as he told James Ballantyne, that the printers would have noticed anything very glaring on the page. When he finished it, he said it was "monstrous, gross and grotesque." Even a slight examination of the plot shows what he meant. He used

his material without changing it; he let old superstitions come true without regard to the characters they affect. There is a prophecy that when the last Lord of Ravenswood shall ride to his own house to court his enemy's daughter, "he shall stable his steed in the Kelpie's flow"—that is, he shall drown in a certain quicksand. The master of Ravenswood does make love to his enemy's daughter, and when he is no longer needed in the story, he accidentally drowns in the quicksand.

This is not the real Scott, nor does this indicate his notion of fate. His typical use of old material is seen in *The Pirate*. That powerful story is based on superstitions and prophecies, none of which has the slightest effect outside of the characters that know them. The chief superstition in the islands in which the story is set, is that a man saved from drowning will some day be the death of his rescuer. Scott shrewdly gets at the need, if we may call it so, which underlay this savage convention; the fewer rescued from the winter shipwrecks, the more plunder to be divided without protest among the islanders. Mordaunt, the hero of the book, braves the dark prophecy and saves from drowning Cleveland, the pirate. He is not superstitious, and naturally enough, Cleveland is not the death of him. But Norna of the Fitful Head, the wild woman half crazed with old folk-lore, who believes herself in league with the devil, moves heaven and earth to ruin Cleveland, in order to protect Mordaunt; for although he is ignorant of their relation, she believes she is Mordaunt's mother, and she would avert what she thinks is his impending doom. She puts the officers of the law on Cleveland's track, and through her efforts he is in danger of capture and execution for

piracy, when she learns beyond question that he, and not Mordaunt, is her lost son.

This is the kind of fatalism that Scott believed in, a fate that we ourselves bring to pass, a destiny that may be prophesied of any character by one who knows that character through and through. If you know the impetuous nature of Œdipus and Jocasta, you can prophesy what will occur in their family, and they will make it come true because they will fear it will; or, to take a more famous illustration, Christ, knowing the character of St. Peter, can prophesy the three-fold betrayal, though nothing but St. Peter's character compels him to it. This is the definition of fate that Scott would subscribe to—the knowledge the gods have of us.

Perhaps you have looked for mention of several other aspects of Scott's art—of his humour, of his incidental poems, of his various kinds of hero and heroine. I have deliberately confined myself to speak of his stoicism, of his theory of character, and of his theory of fate, because my purpose was to say a word for that part of his genius which is commonly undervalued. He is no poet of abstractions, nor would I rank him with Edmund Spenser nor with Milton as a philosopher, but he was an independent thinker, and more nearly right, as he was certainly more sane, than many brilliant men around him who have credit for more ideas. I hold with those who call him the wisest and the greatest man of English letters in the nineteenth century, and he is incomparably our greatest novelist. To be steeped in his books, to be on familiar terms with the noble men and women who dwell in them, to share their courage, their zest in life, their self-reliance, their intellectual sincerity, until their outlook

on life becomes our own—this would be a good protection against most of the romances which to-day it is our frailty rather than our fate to read, and against those social cure-alls which still offer to make us good and happy, at low cost, with just a little rearranging of environment.

IX
DON JUAN

IX

DON JUAN

Byron's masterpiece is one of the poems least understood by the general reader. The fault is not the general reader's. When the brilliant poet began *Don Juan* at Venice in September, 1818, he was in his most desperate mood, angry with life, disgusted with himself, and reckless of public opinion, even of the opinion of his friends. Undoubtedly, he started out to shock the world. Some of the attempts to be shocking seem now, and perhaps seemed at the time, rather sophomoric. The insults hurled at Wordsworth and Southey in the dedication were, to say the least, uncalled for, and could have no other significance than the ill temper and the jealousy they suggested. Even in the later portions of the work where Byron had come into his own again as a great poet, reckless passages recur, rough phrases and indecorous situations for which there is no necessity in the work of art, and for which few critics and even admirers of Byron would take the trouble to seek excuse. The subject itself strikes one as a deliberate attempt to stir Mrs. Grundy. Don Juan was the legendary hero who excelled in the profligacy of his life. He was a great seducer of women, a completely cynical and base character. To select this figure for his subject and to dedicate the poem—of course without permission—to Robert

Southey, the most respectable of poet laureates, the author of that masterpiece in children's literature, the *Three Bears*, was merely to confess in public that Byron wished to get the British reader excited.

The roughness, the recklessness, and the occasional impropriety of Byron's poem fitted in altogether too well with the unpleasant reputation he had acquired in the English-speaking world. His great poem was looked at askance from the day the first instalment of it appeared. And even now it is too little read. Many a reader who delights in the special note of contemporary dramas or novels or poems is unacquainted with this source of the so-called modern manner. What is worse, most of us, even though we read widely, are content to rest in ignorance of the fine side of Byron, revealed nowhere else so well as in this poem—of his deeper aspirations for truth and sincerity, his generous idealizing of youth, his extraordinary grasp of world affairs, and his profound knowledge of human nature. A discussion of the famous poem is more than justified if it helps us, while admitting freely its defects, to understand better those qualities which give it a high place in the literature of the world.

The poem is so long, and in its manner so rambling, that few of us ever become familiar with the plot. We read a stanza or two here and there, or in school we recite a passage or so, but we seldom have occasion to read it consecutively. Yet one of the remarkable traits of Byron was the preciseness of his mind in poetry as in other matters. He had more than his share of sound sense and appreciation of fact. However rambling his plots may be, they can easily be remembered, and they always have a

calculated meaning which it would be a misfortune to miss. He tells us the story of Don Juan in his youth; in fact, the hero is little more than a boy in the first canto, and only a few years older when the poem ends. It is the more innocent and inexperienced Don Juan who is to be set before us, and we see at once the mischief in Byron's intentions—he is going to point out that it wasn't Don Juan who seduced society, but society which ruined Don Juan. Moreover, this society which besets him with temptations is to be composed not of reckless and questionable characters like Lord Byron himself, but of admirable men and women—chiefly admirable women—of the type who thought Byron disreputable. Don Juan, of course, is born in Spain according to the legend, but we have no difficulty in transposing the picture to the English society which Byron knew, and as we read on we transpose it so that it becomes the portrait of conventional society, anywhere, at any time. The way in which men and women, chiefly women, behave under the mask of respectability is in a narrow sense the theme of Byron's satire. Those modern writers who tell us that it is not man who makes love, but woman, or that it is not the feminine sex which is down-trodden, but the masculine, are repeating Byron's interpretation of the Don Juan story. Was Don Juan the lover of a thousand women? Then he was a thousand times a victim of their wiles. Did he seduce the innocent? Of course—because, according to Byron, it is chiefly those who have a reputation for innocence who go hunting for the male. The best comment on this idea of his can be found in his letters, chiefly in the latest instalments of them published only a few years ago. His own encounters with women

who had come under the spell of his personality warped his point of view and poisoned the strong vein of sentiment in his heart.

Young Don Juan then is the son of a most remarkable lady in high society, who gives her time to austere subjects, chiefly to mathematics. She has an equally admirable friend, a lady of her own high class, who in turn has an equally admirable husband, a distinguished Don. Byron insinuates that the friendship of Don Juan's mother for the other lady was a sort of cloak for a clandestine affair with the other lady's husband. Be that as it may, the other lady fell desperately and most indiscreetly in love with her friend's son. When Juan had reached the age when most boys are about to leave school for college, he and his mother's dearest friend were found in a situation usually spoken of as compromising. The friend's husband divorced her and, as Byron implies, was then free to carry on his own affair with Juan's mother. And Juan was sent to travel in the world, partly to escape the scandal he had contributed to, and partly to improve his character. Byron wonders why any one should think that European travel would improve the morals of such a youth, but in good society, of course, travel has long been a recipe for improvement and education.

This is the story of the first canto of the poem, which serves after all as a kind of introduction. The real story begins with Don Juan's travels. Yet in these early stanzas much of Byron's genius and practically all of the manner he intends to employ in the poem are indicated. At his best he states a mean or trivial situation in such terms that it becomes an expression of universal wisdom. Juan's mistress, for example, writes

him a farewell letter when he is snatched away from her. Some lines from it are still quoted the world over:

> " Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
> 'Tis woman's whole existence . . ."

The scoffing manner is also present. Byron likes to put us into the mood of a true poet and then, as it were, pull the chair from under us and let us collapse into doggerel or nasty cynicisms, and when we are still down he will raise us again to a superb mood. The trick is perhaps a cheap one except that only a genius could play it. The scoffing might be possible for any of us, but not a brilliant recovery into a poetic mood. A fine example occurs when he comments on this first love of Juan's. He begins with some beautiful images of sentiment—the sweetness of the welcome home, the sweetness of the affection of children, the sweetness of the beauty of nature—and then by a rapid descent we read these lines:

> " Sweet is revenge—especially to women,
> Pillage to soldiers, prize-money to seamen.
>
> Sweet is a legacy, and passing sweet
> The unexpected death of some old lady
> Or gentleman of seventy years complete,
> Who've made 'us youth' wait too—too long already . . ."

Then by a miracle he brings us back to a noble mood in his description of the generous sentiments of first love.

Juan starts on his adventures with the light heart of youth. Byron explains that of course he was sorry to leave home and sorry to leave his first and only love, but though the books often say otherwise, we do get over these terrific early tragedies, and as the vessel ploughs along the boy is much interested in the new world before him. He has the temperament for

adventure. Adventure comes to him, however, in larger quantity than he expected. A terrible storm arises, the boat sinks, a few survivors manage to get into a quite inadequate craft, and for many days thirst and hunger reduce them to insanity and even cannibalism. Of all the group Juan is at last the only survivor. He is washed up, emaciated and unconscious, on the shore of a romantic island ruled over by an eminently respectable pirate.

The description of the storm and the shipwreck is one of the great achievements of literature. Some readers, like the poet Keats, have been offended by the cynical tone with which Byron recounts the wretched end of the crew and passengers. Yet if our sympathies are profoundly roused, it is the poet after all who has roused them. The cynical tone is a very thin veneer. Perhaps it even increases our sense of the tragedy. However we feel about this, we ought to have no difficulty in appreciating the grandeur of the scene. Byron loved to describe the elements on a large scale; mountains and oceans were his favourite themes. Here he gives the sense of titanic forces in the presence of which man ought to learn humility. On the island shore Don Juan is found by the pirate's daughter, Haidee. She is a mere child, but in her climate, wherever that is, youth matures quickly, and she has reached the moment, Byron says, when romance will begin for her. Here at her feet the sea has washed up a handsome boy. With the help of a trustworthy attendant she gets the unconscious body into a safe cave, and every moment she can contrive to be out of her father's presence she spends with this new companion, nursing him back to health, and in all innocence declaring her passion for him. After several weeks

her father and his men leave the island on a buccaneering expedition with the same decorum with which any head of a family would go to business. Expecting him to be gone for months, Haidee throws caution to the winds, brings her lover from his hiding place, and institutes a series of festivals at her father's house as though she had come to the throne and were welcoming her royal mate. At the height of this happiness the pirate father unexpectedly comes back. He is far too experienced to be surprised at anything, but he objects to a self-appointed son-in-law. Juan attempts to fight him, is overcome, of course, and sold into slavery. Haidee dies of a broken heart.

In many ways this is the central portion of the story. It represents that vein of sentiment which was always more characteristic of Byron than he quite liked to admit. He lingers over the story of Haidee and Juan as though he were reluctant himself to resume his satirical and bitter manner. Incidentally he confesses, to that very public which he intended to shock, his profound regret that time and too much experience had dried up the generous springs of his own heart, and made such an experience as this a sort of lost paradise into which he could only gaze through closed gates.

Juan finds himself in a slave market with a motley set of fellow-victims. Byron takes occasion not only to give a picture of the East as he had seen it in his travels, but also to give a cross-section of certain classes of society at home. The various unfortunates up for sale tell their story, and they are such confessions as Byron would like to have us hear—domestic troubles, the perfidy of friends, the unscrupulousness of the supposedly respectable. Juan is at last sold to an emissary of the Sultan, and taken to the Turkish court.

There, to his great surprise, he is ordered to put on woman's dress, and indignantly refuses, but the choice becomes clear between obeying or being drowned in a sack. Once dressed up as a girl, he is ushered immediately into the presence of the Sultana, who, it seems, had taken a fancy to him as the handsome slave in the recent sale, and his disguise was designed to get him past the palace guard into her presence. When he is left alone with her, the youth is disgusted with her crude sensuality. The memory of Haidee is too fresh for him to feel the charms of this imperious woman. Her resentment might have finished his career at once, but opportunely the Sultan appeared and Juan was hurried off to the harem to which his apparel seemed to assign him. The episode which follows is one of those mocking passages in Byron in which he invites the reader's imagination to do its worst, but himself remains fairly discreet. The upshot is that the Sultana learns of a friendship between the disguised youth and one of the *odalisques*. She summons them into her presence, intending to consign them both to a speedy death. But they manage to escape, and Juan next appears as a refugee with the Russian Army, which is besieging a Turkish town.

Byron had never succumbed to the British hatred of Napoleon and worship of Wellington. He was one of the first poets to say plainly that in war both sides are often wrong. He had no illusions as to any lasting benefits from military conflict. He had been courageous to say in an earlier poem that with all his faults Napoleon was a much greater man than the English commander who defeated him at Waterloo. This attitude, construed, of course, as unpatriotic, did not increase his popularity in England. He uses the episodes into

which Juan now enters to portray the futility, and even the absurdity, of war. The numerous books produced in various countries during the last seven years to give us the whole truth of the World War, seem but dilutions of Byron's stinging lines, in which once for all are described the mixed motives, the blend of the heroic and the ridiculous, the sensual and the spiritual, which warfare brings into the open. First the siege is described, with the various kinds of heroism all soldiers know—the true kind and the absurd, accidental varieties in which the hero is brave in spite of himself. Then the town is sacked, and the silly cruelties and senseless destructions which characterize such moments of victory, are depicted. Incidentally the poet represents women, the supposed victims of this orgy, in a cynical light. Whether one approves or not depends somewhat on temperament, and much more, perhaps, upon experience. The British reader of the time did not approve.

Throughout the siege and the victory Juan conducted himself so well that he came to the attention of the Empress, Catherine the Great. What her attention amounted to it is easy to guess, when we remember that Juan was still young and handsome. He had a short period of uneasy prosperity as her accepted lover. The force of this episode has been somewhat diminished with time, but when it was written Byron knew those conservatives would squirm badly who liked to believe well of all their established monarchs and benevolent despots. As the poet recounts it, of course, Juan is only the victim of the insatiable old woman. He had really loved but once in the whole story, and even in the Haidee episode it was not necessary to do the wooing.

After Russia, Juan visits England, the land of freedom and enlightenment. Here the poem ends.

Byron says that he intended to write much more, but the Countess Guiccioli objected to the bad light in which he was representing her sex. The implication is that if she had approved he would have continued, yet the poem as it stands makes a complete effect and ends on a satirical point. In England, the enlightened country, Juan not only finds all the characteristics of human nature which he had encountered in the pirate's island, at the Turkish palace, in the Russian Army, and at Catherine's court, but there is even a particular resemblance between his adventures there and in his native country of Spain. Once more a scheming woman lays her snare for him, and in the very last line of the text we are served notice that she will succeed.

This is the story of the poem, the clearly sketched background against which Byron elaborated certain powerful effects. Whatever is scandalous in the poem is in the plot, in the obvious attempt to be reckless or shocking. But the deeper effects which the poet manages even with his plot to convey are what make *Don Juan* important to us now. It is an old saying of the critics that when a great poet is in the vein he can make almost any theme express all of himself. The plot of *Don Juan* is not a great subject, and the implications of it are frequently mean, but it suffices as a vehicle for Byron's genius. In one place or another as he went along he managed to insert a complete disclosure of his mind, so that the poem is in a way a great autobiography. He contrived also to give a remarkable picture of life at his time, so that better than any novel *Don Juan* is a record of British and European society at the end of the Napoleonic era. And best of all, he drew the human traits of his men and women. He drew, that is, not only the portrait of 1818 but of 1928.

If the poem is taken as an autobiography we have to notice first of all his characteristic bitterness against women. The explanation could be found within the poem if we did not know it from his letters and from his life. He was born highly sentimental and emotional, and he grew up to be, in the narrow sense of the word, romantic. But the society which he knew, beginning with his own home, was far from admirable. And even in his boyhood he was beginning to see that the conventional adulation of the female sex was at times undeserved. As a child he had too much brain for the stupid and vulgar environment in which he was brought up. It is said that a schoolboy friend visiting him at the age of twelve or thereabouts remarked, " Byron, your mother is a fool," and the future author of *Don Juan* said characteristically, " I know it, but you shouldn't tell me." The ladies whom he met in high society were most of them disappointing, shallow in their minds and unscrupulous in their affections. Wise as he became in their realm of human nature, he was too sentimental to accept this aspect of life with good humour. Instead of recognizing the many good qualities of the women around him and the sterling friendship with which a few always honoured him, he became bitter and took refuge in absurd dreams of fabulous islands in which Zuleikas and Haidees presided, like Miranda, innocent, unspoiled and ready to give their hearts at sight to the Byronic hero. In one sense the poem is a tirade against the average woman. Yet even when we have made this allowance for the poet's bias, we must admit that he portrayed feminine character with an extraordinary wit and insight. He was one of the first poets who attempted to understand women rather than simply to worship them. His casual remarks often seem prophetic of the

serious study more lately given to the problems of sex. That he would have preferred himself to keep the older point of view, chivalrous and romantic, is entirely clear, but unlucky experience and his own extraordinary powers of observation made him write such things of womankind as incurred great unpopularity for a while, and now, by way of compensation, seem likely to win him increasing respect as a discerning psychologist.

We notice also Byron's hatred of hypocrisy and his contempt for those who set too high a value on public opinion and worldly convention. To some extent this hatred of hypocrisy and the conventional is connected with his bitterness towards women, for undoubtedly he believed that hypocrisy and convention made up the world in which the women were most at home. But he has in mind also the fact that even good conventions may sometimes stand in the way of an honest vision. He had a passion for seeing straight. It may be as many of his critics contend, that his own observations were always warped, yet it remains true that he desired nothing more than a clear insight into all the facts of life, whether or not they were favourable to himself. Many a man who deplores the unlovely aspects of *Don Juan* rises from its pages strengthened as though by some spiritual tonic. The wealth of honest observation in it opens our eyes to aspects of life entirely familiar, but, until Byron mentioned them, unnoticed. He had a presentiment that the century then beginning would be one of change and expansion, likely to betray the instability of many conventions which the older society thought unshakable. His own taste after all was for the aristocratic tradition, yet he could not be false to the facts as he saw them. Of course we take the same view in our own generation, and urge our elders to reckon with

the new elements in the world before it is too late. But in one respect we are more optimistic and less wise than Byron—perhaps we believe that change will usher in an entirely new sort of human nature, a golden age from which the faults of our predecessors will be eliminated. Byron saw the doom of conventional society, but he had no hope whatever of a new kind of human nature. The scene would change, and perhaps the plot of life, and there would be a great altering of costumes and alternation of parts, but the same characters would reappear to the end.

This view has been held by many writers whom it did not necessarily render pessimistic. Byron, however, was increasingly melancholy over the futility of life as he had seen it. Most readers agree that he was glad to be rid of it all when death found him early. Of course he was not proud of his own career, and if we wish to be simply a moralist, we can say that his failure to justify himself in private life robbed him of all happiness. Yet a more subtle explanation might be fairer to him and quite as illuminating for us. He was what one is tempted to call a defeated romanticist. He had, that is, a zest for adventure, a faith in unlimited experience such as characterizes the true romanticist, but he seems to have lived none of his experiences through. An ideal romanticist, that is, has an insatiable curiosity to explore life by living rather than by thinking about it. When he is young he foresees exciting experiences immediately ahead of him, and when he has reached them, he foresees equally exciting experiences beyond, and so on to his grave. But the ideal romanticist exhausts the experience in each case; he lives so completely in his childhood that he has nothing to regret when he passes on to youth, and he lives youth so exhaustively that he leaves nothing

unfinished when he passes on to middle age. In such a life the result of experience is wisdom, a clearer understanding of life in general. One might say that for the true romantic temperament the future is rosy with the prospect of experiment; in the past all experience has been consumed, and from the fire emerges the precious grains of wisdom. Goethe would qualify as an example of the romantic temperament. Byron, like Shelley, shared the temper only in part. He approached experience with preconceptions, second-hand wisdom, and failing ever to live completely he carried with him to his grave the memory of much experience which he had yearned for, but which had escaped him.

To say this is to criticize him, but it is also to explain the greatness of his poem. For, after all, very few men and women are successful romanticists like Goethe. Few of us live deeply, exhaust our experience, and win from it a satisfying wisdom of life. The vast majority in our modern world, at least, are exactly like Byron. We approach experience with our minds too much made up about it, and we leave it with some part of our nature undeveloped or unsatisfied. For us, therefore, as well as for him, life is often futile. A better philosophy would save us; meanwhile our portrait is written in Don Juan. So much for the autobiography in the poem.

But Byron belonged to the Napoleonic age when others besides the great conqueror had a vision of Europe as a whole—had what we now like to call an international mind. Why this large view should later have shrunk, the historian will some day tell us. To-day with the greatest difficulty we are trying to recover it. Voltaire had it. Goethe had it. *Don Juan* was one of the last important works to express it. Byron mastered Europe early as another man might master a philosophy, or a

mathematical theory. On his youthful travels he took with him a remarkable historical sense, an understanding of the racial and political forces which made Europe, and which would continue for some time to control its fortunes. To this extent he was a statesman, but being primarily a poet he thought of Europe as one of man's great romantic adventures, a progress in civilization which had various episodes in chronology and an interesting distribution in space. When Anatole France at the end of his life said that Europe was passing and a new world must rise on the Continent, he was thinking of that Europe which Byron saw romantically, a civilization which began with Greece and Rome, which was modified by Hebrew influences, by the barbarians from the north, and by the Arabs from Africa. Archæologists now indicate an earlier beginning of Western civilization, but in Byron's thought the first glorious chapter occurred in Athens and Sparta, and the last in England, whither the European mind had slowly travelled until it confronted the Atlantic. An American might feel that Byron was somewhat limited in his view if he did not realize the continuity of European and American civilization. He was more generous to America than most other English poets, but when he wrote there was little reason to speak of a continuous culture bridging the ocean. Something had come to an end on the shores of Great Britain, and the fact that the conduct of his countrymen seemed not quite so sublime as one ought to expect from those who illustrated the pinnacle of civilization, added to his melancholy. When Americans think of Western culture now, they visualize it as reaching the edge of the Pacific and there stopping. On the other side is the Orient. After all, this is much as Byron thought of it for Europe. When Americans take their

summer vacations now they visit the Europe which he was thinking of, and which for the most part he described. Perhaps it was even then a legendary world. If he had not written *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, would it ever have cast upon Americans the spell to which their pilgrimages bear witness?

Aside from his bitterness against women, Byron, we said, had much wisdom about human nature—a sort of general wisdom which characterized the eighteenth century rather than the nineteenth. The difference is easily seen if we contrast *Don Juan*, for example, with any important poem of Browning. The eighteenth century in England, like every classical period, was interested in learning the general facts of psychology. Pope wrote an essay on Man with which we are familiar, at least by title. Hundreds of other people in all countries contributed their experience to the great question: What is human nature? In this study those traits which we all share were important, and our special peculiarities were comparatively negligible. For Byron, therefore, the variations of human nature are of little consequence compared with the broad resemblances. A gentleman, of course, has a certain technique of manners, a servant has another. But face to face with the essential problems of life both would react in much the same way, and Byron had a shrewd knowledge of all these predicaments in which elemental human nature comes to the surface.

The nineteenth century, on the other hand, became interested in the special case. Browning made himself the advocate of the individual point of view. Whatever belongs to general human nature he tended to omit from his view, as well known already, and he stressed the singularities of each human being, such as in the

mass we are too likely to overlook. To-day the renewed interest in psychology indicates perhaps a return to the eighteenth century point of view. No matter how many individuals we have studied separately, we try at last to deduce from them some general wisdom about the race. We begin to understand Byron better. A few decades ago the nineteenth century reader with an eye for the individualistic, thought Byron only an immense egotist, for ever exploiting himself and his private life. Though it was perfectly proper for Browning to make fictitious characters expose themselves so, it offended us that an actual man should have practised the technique so conscientiously on his own story. More recently, however, we are willing to recognize the immense stretches in Byron's work which reveal not his story but his wisdom about human nature. Those biographers who still write up the lurid mysteries of his career are a little belated. His personal career is of far less importance than the insight he gives us in our own modern terms into the behaviour of men and women.

X

MOBY DICK

X

MOBY DICK

It is usual to say that Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is a unique story. It suggests nothing before it in American literature nor in European, and it has had no successful imitators. It makes upon the reader a peculiar emotional effect like that of no other book. But it is usual to say also that Melville was not, after all, a great writer. He couldn't repeat this success in other kinds of stories, or at least he never did, and even in *Moby Dick* his methods are often long-winded and crude. Both criticisms are easy for the reader to follow. The story grips us, and we know it is great, but when our attention is directed to minor flaws, we have to admit them.

The flaws, however, are very minor, and it is pedantic to worry over them in a masterpiece of the first order. What the adverse critic forgets to notice is that *Moby Dick* is not a novel, but a poem. Though written in prose it has the power of a great epic—that is, it gathers up our emotions round a central figure, a central incident, and one central mood. Those who read it as a novel might defend their approach by saying that the life of the whaler, and the manners and customs of Bedford and Nantucket are here portrayed faithfully, and that the humours and small details of ordinary life, on the whaler and ashore, are set down in the conversational

tone of modern realism. Once convinced that the book is a novel, such readers proceed to find fault with those parts of it which by all standards of novel writing are weak and ineffectual. But if we begin the other way about and recognize first of all the poem in the book, we shall end as most critics now do, in admiration of the genius which could incorporate in a work of such magnificent beauty so much that is homely, whimsical, and matter-of-fact.

To call the book a poem is not a fantastic apology for it. We are beginning to realize that more than one American writer of the early periods left us so-called novels which make the effect of poetry—Cooper's *Deerslayer* is an illustration. But *Moby Dick* leads them all in the vastness of the impression it makes. In moments of enthusiasm we like to say that it is the greatest of sea stories. While we read, the ocean, all the oceans, seem to spread around us. In that immense space a handful of men hunt for one particular whale, one fish out of all the seas, and, terrible thought! we begin to understand that the great whale is hunting for one man on that one ship. Nothing can keep them apart. Here perhaps is an image of fate simpler and more awful than we can find in ancient story. Not peculiarly American, of course—rather a universal image. The American pictures in the book belong to the shore, to the ports of time and space from which these mariners come. On the sea the characters resolve into human nature, the horizons melt into infinity. One begins to reckon in broad terms by height and depth, and the purpose and the peril of the voyage begin to focus in the ancient poet's sentence, "There is that Leviathan."

The plot in its outline is astonishingly simple. The story is told by a young man who resolved to ship on

a whaling voyage. By a series of accidents natural enough, but coloured in his memory by the fatal events which followed, he ships with Captain Ahab, a veteran of the sea. Two things about the captain are unforgettable; one is the long, thin scar that ran across his face. You are free to guess whether some desperate wound had made it, or whether Ahab was born with that mark. His sailors were afraid to mention it in his presence; no one ever asked him its origin. One of the older men insisted it was a scar or brand received not from human beings, but from the sea itself in a great storm. The other unforgettable thing about Captain Ahab was his mutilated left leg. He had lost this useful member in battle with a great whale. Part of his revenge he took ironically by wearing not a wooden but an ivory leg, made of the polished bone of a sperm whale's jaw. On the quarter-deck he had bored a shallow hole into which this yellow bone fitted. Once steadied there, he could hold his position in the roughest storm.

When Ishmael, the narrator, shipped on the voyage, the captain had already become the victim of a fixed idea. From the moment he lost his leg he determined to kill the particular whale which maimed him. All his voyages have been quests for his antagonist. The story of *Moby Dick* is simply the record of his last attempt, of his finding the white whale, of the elemental struggle which followed, of the loss of his ship, his life, and the lives of all the crew except Ishmael, who keeps afloat and is rescued to tell the tale.

Obviously a story of this kind can succeed only if it overwhelms us with the sense of terror and grandeur. The realistic portions of the book to which reference has been made, serve as unexpected aids to this effect.

Melville wants to repeat the idea of the whale in many moods and variations, as one would repeat a musical theme, until it becomes a sort of obsession with the reader. When in the last pages the white whale himself appears, more awful even than we had feared, the awfulness is the result of the long preparation through which we have been led. Fears and terrors have been stored up in us without our knowledge, to be precipitated at the end by incidents stirring but surprisingly few. If the book is long, it is because Melville needed room to suggest these terrors and store them up in us. In this preparation he is an artist of the greatest skill. He can afford to be jocular or casual as he sows in our unsuspecting consciousness seeds of strange horrors.

For example, when Ishmael went looking for employment at sea, he found himself in a crowded whaling port where all the inns were named after some aspect of the sea hunt. He had the choice of stopping at the Crossed Harpoons, or at the Sword Fish, at the Trap, or at the Spouter Inn. This last appealed to him because the owner bore the astonishing name of Peter Coffin. At the Spouter Inn there was but one bed to be hired, or rather only half a bed. The young man was reluctant to share his room with an unknown sailor, but rather than lose sleep altogether he risked it. His bedmate turned out to be a cannibal, Queequeg, the chief harpooner on the weird voyage they are soon to take together. Queequeg came late to bed because it was an active night in the saloons, and as he explained, he hoped to sell his remaining head while the sailors had some money. That is, he had brought a number of dried human heads from his native land, which he disposed of to morbid purchasers who liked that kind of souvenir. Melville introduces this unusual character

with emphasis on all his unbelievable aspects. He is wise enough to encourage our doubt that cannibals can be found at Bedford or Martha's Vineyard; he makes us quite sure the police would interfere with the sale of human heads, yet after we are well past this bizarre episode, when we have reviewed Queequeg's history and have come to know his character, we doubt nothing. Each of his incredible characteristics is shaped to serve the total effect of the prose poem. He is first a whimsical or outlandish character; he next becomes a sample of irony; at the last he and the other two harpooners, by their mere presence on the ship, interpret Captain Ahab's madness, or at least make it seem part of human nature. They also follow fixed ideas.

Queequeg began life as a prince on a cannibal island. His soul was touched with ambition to uplift his people, and he sought to visit Christian lands that he might bring back to his home patterns of perfect conduct. Since his only means of reaching America would be on a whaling ship, he smuggled himself into one of them. A whaling ship, however, is not the best place in which to make the acquaintance of Christianity, or Western civilization. Before Queequeg reached port he had learned the sad truth that human nature, even in civilized countries, has strong resemblances to savage man. When he knew he could take back to his own kingdom nothing better than they already had, he pursued his inquiries no further. But since he knew also that he had contaminated the purity of his pagan youth by contact with the complex West as found in a whaling ship, he believed he ought never to go home, but rather, for the good of his people, to remain an exile on the sea. He carried an idol

about with him to which he prayed. He was as lonely a figure as the captain. He spoke a language of his own, which the sailors understood, and he bore with him at all times his favourite harpoon.

The second harpooner was Tashtego, an Indian from Martha's Vineyard, and the third was Daggoo, a negro from Africa. The impression they make is at first exotic, but as we see them in boats pursuing the whale relentlessly, differing from each other in racial memories, and from the other sailors in language and appearance, yet united in this one relentless pursuit, we begin to feel their close unity with something in nature, something in destiny which has brought about this and all other conflicts. They differ from Captain Ahab in that we know why he is mad, and their insanity is casual and unexplained. Around the four of them the other sailors group themselves, bound to Captain Ahab by curiosity, by a half-pitiful loyalty, or merely by the terms of their contract, but all more or less aware that he is insane, and that the voyage is crazy.

Other incidents at the beginning of the story, apparently casual, prepare an intellectual edge for our emotions. After Ishmael has made the acquaintance of his cannibal bedfellow at the Spouter Inn, he attends with him an evening service at a local church, where the preacher, taking Jonah as his theme, expounds religion and morality. Here again Melville's art is more subtle than it first appears. The passage gives a fair record of the kind of preaching which took place in the New England whale ports, and it serves to heighten the bizarre interest of the early part of this story, but it also introduces the note of religion, the note of spiritual devotion, even the fanatic note which is essential to the final effect of the story. Queequeg

is not the only person in the book who carries an idol about with him. Others in the ship, the Quaker, Bildad, the New Englander, Peleg, and Ahab himself, are in a deep sense religious. The story becomes a parable of man's agony to unite himself with what is universal, with the infinite, as we glimpse infinity in nature, in time, and in space. The preaching at the chapel is religion in its lower key, if you choose, but the nautical sermon, once we have smiled at it, has introduced a theme susceptible of expansion into effects of grandeur. Later on we appreciate the art which set it at the beginning of the story.

Much the same praise belongs to those apparently casual chapters which interrupt the straightforward incidents of the voyage. Ishmael says that the incessant talk of whales, and especially of this one white sperm whale, arouses his curiosity, and he gathers what information he can about the habits of whales in general. He tells us the seasons in which they can be found in certain regions, and though the information seems aside from the plot, it helps us to believe that the captain knows where to look for his enemy in the wide ocean. We read legends of the ferocity of whales, and of their cunning in taking revenge on their tormentors. We listen to a discussion, conducted apparently with much openness of mind, about the possibility of their sinking a large ship. The evidence seems to be that a sperm whale attacking a wooden ship, head on, can stove in her planks. This debate, of course, accustoms the reader to the possibility of such a catastrophe, and destroys in advance the scepticism that we should otherwise feel when Moby Dick sinks the ship.

The minute description of the first killing, of the

minor battles with the less terrible creatures, and of the disposal of their carcasses afterwards, might pass for mere realism, for the usual heaping up of details to give an accurate picture of the whaling industry, but Melville is not a realist, and these long chapters serve another purpose than to record an outward scene. They are meant to stir our imagination, and they undoubtedly do set us reasoning about the size of the giant whale the captain is looking for. As the first blubber is stripped and the tremendous skeletons measured before our eyes, they seem large enough—overwhelming, in fact; but we know that these early victims are comparatively small whales. We begin to wonder how Moby Dick can be conquered, if he is larger than they.

In other words, when we say that this story is a poem rather than a novel, we mean that its art consists not in reproducing pictures of the outside of life, such as we can call faithful, but rather in preparing our minds for an effect of emotion, so that at the end there will be a powerful catharsis, or release of feeling. From this point of view he would be a bold critic who would call the book too long, or would attempt to abbreviate. No detail is lost in the ultimate effect. Where Melville learned the skill to choose these details and to produce that effect, we don't know. The book is an inspiration of genius.

What is the one large effect which this prose poem tries to make? Moby Dick, the white whale, is after all the focus of the story rather than the main subject of it. When you have read the book several times and it has begun to haunt your memory, you realize that the central theme of it is the sea—the sea, and all vast aspects of nature. In early American literature nature was more than once treated as a theme in itself, without

regard to the spiritual meanings nature suggests. This direct treatment is rarer in modern literature than one might suppose. For many men nature is a language of morality, even a vehicle of divine revelation. Wordsworth found his moral evil and good in the impulses which flowers, fields and mountains gave him. Emerson, from his earliest book to his latest essay, saw in nature glimpses of the Over-soul, aids to man's comfort and power, and a language with which he could talk. The unquestioned truth in these points of view sometimes blinds us to the fact that nature can also be enjoyed or studied for itself alone. It is true that the stars, the sea, the fields, and the flowers furnish us a kind of scale against which to measure the human stature. Yet there are moments when we enjoy mountains or fields with no secondary meanings, when the greenness and the freshness of a spring day, or the silver of a moonlight night, enter our souls as an absolute experience. Fenimore Cooper excelled in rendering nature in this bare simplicity. He portrayed in Leatherstocking a man of high morals; but Leatherstocking's love of nature was not Wordsworth's. His character grew out of his early training—indirectly, that is, from books and from tradition. He went to nature only for an atmosphere which he loved, and in which he could feel at ease. The story of his retirement from the settlements, as the line of civilization advanced, and his retreat into the spaces of the prairie, is one of the most poetic renderings the world has of man's love of nature for herself alone.

The same love, though in a far more tragic key, permeates *Moby Dick*. In the very first pages it is suggested somewhat casually by the young narrator. "Call me Ishmael," he begins. Years ago, he tells

us, having little money and finding nothing on shore to interest him, he decided to visit the watery parts of the world. Whenever civilization palled upon him, he learned to mend his soul by going to sea. What he got from his voyages was not a moral lesson in the ordinary sense; rather a spiritual new birth, from revisiting infinite space.

Many a poet through the centuries has turned to the sea as to one aspect of nature which seems to resist men's moralizing tendency. In the splendid close of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron emphasizes our inability to leave a trace on the waters. The shores keep the wreck of civilizations, and are scarred by human history; the waters are now as they were at the dawn of creation. Morally so, as well as physically. Our feeble philosophies of cause and effect seem thin indeed in an open boat, or on a fragile raft in mid-ocean. This absolute self-sufficiency of the waters is not easy to render in words. Cooper himself could not do it, however skilful he was in suggesting the infinite beauty of nature ashore. Conrad, our modern story-teller of the sea, is most successful when he shows us his heroes caught in a storm or a hurricane—that is, in some special and local manifestation of the waters which can be described as a problem for particular men at a special moment. But the awful stretch of waters in their normal state, rolling beyond eyesight, almost beyond reach of thought—this, few poets have rendered.

The surface of the ocean as we see it even from the deck of the comfortable liner, places beneath our eyes the mystery of space, that one infinity which besieges even the most materialistic kinds of thought. Space can have had no beginning, as it can have no end. Matter might be annihilated, but how can we do away with

space? It can have no boundary in the universe, or we should be compelled to imagine something tangible and physical built up around it. Herbert Spencer and many less famous men have recorded the sort of terror which space inspires in the mind that broods upon it too long.

Something of this awful grandeur Melville has incorporated in his book, and it is his success in conveying this mood to the reader which sets him apart from other writers. The whale is the image of the sea, if you choose, of this mysterious and terrible space, but the sea is the image of nothing but itself, and after the last page is read, the picture which remains with us is of the undisturbed waters below which Ahab, the monster and the strong ship have disappeared for ever. Melville repeats this image of the vastness of the sea, playing variations on it, but letting us forget it in no part of the story.

In just such a scene, he tells us, Ahab's original misfortune and his madness began. While still a fairly young captain he had attacked the great white whale with three boats. Moby Dick had stove in the boats, lashed the oars and the men with his tail, and had been about to sink to a safe depth when Ahab had dashed at the creature with no weapon more formidable than the line knife. In a sort of malign humour, as it seemed, as though to express his contempt for the feeble weapon, the whale had spared the rash man's life, but had bitten off one leg. In another moment the sea was calm again, except for the heads of the whalers bobbing up and down as they swam for their lives.

Melville makes a curious kind of circle out of the three ideas of the sea, the captain's madness, and the whale. The image of the wide waters, dwelt on con-

tinuously, becomes terrible, even though the whale were not there. It expresses the horror of space. But in this horror the whale is comfortably at home. Captain Ahab, it is clear, was no sailor who followed the sea for love. We feel he never was, not even before his accident; he must have been drawn to the deep by a malign attraction, which would naturally be symbolized for him and for us by Moby Dick, as soon as the white whale appeared. When he lost his leg, he was a fairly normal person, except for this sinister interest in the sea. His attack on the whale had been purely in the pursuit of his hunting trade; no private wrath had yet animated him, but on the long voyage home as the pain of his wound made him delirious, and in the years afterwards as he realized what the accident meant in physical embarrassments, the man came to associate all his troubles with the white whale. Whatever disappointment in life befell him, or whatever failure occurred in his professional or private life, he laid it to the door of that evil sea spirit. His desire for revenge warmed easily into madness.

Oddly enough, says Melville, this growing madness, which all his comrades recognized, increased rather than diminished his prestige as a whaler. Efficient as he may have been before, he was now a terrible hunter. Even the white leg with which he stumped the deck added some strange virtue of stability and sureness. In the eyes of his fellow-sailors he became devoted to a cause, a destiny, and those who sailed with him were either whalers of the first quality who wished to be sure of a splendid catch, or desperadoes who had no objection to being in at the final struggle between man and the leviathan.

Completing the circle of the three ideas, space, mad-

ness and monster, Melville uses the theme of growing insanity and increasing efficiency to fix our attention more surely on the whale. He tells us, and we see for ourselves as we read, that the whale haunting Captain Ahab's mind serves to bring out a strange unity in his character. The irony of his misfortune was that he never would have been quite himself if Moby Dick had not bitten off his leg and incurred his wrath. Those profound possibilities which lie in every man for good and evil slowly but clearly develop in the captain, until on this last voyage when he sails to his death he has achieved everything that was possible in him. We can't resist feeling the parallel between the ocean that swallows up all wrecks, all traces of passage, and the idea of the whale which gradually engulfs all the softer and leisurely aspects of Ahab's character. When he enters the boat for his last chase of his enemy, he is no longer like most of us, a divided or incomplete personality; he is united within himself. His body and his soul, as Melville says, are one, alike maimed, if you choose, but equally steeled to an effort which can hardly be explained in ordinary terms of motives and causes, but which provides complete expression of the man's whole life.

In another sense, also, the whale, even before we meet it, is made to engulf the other interests of the book. It is a white whale. Melville calls attention to the importance of this ghostly animal in a magnificent chapter, one of the most splendid in our literature. He lets Ishmael say that if the white whale had made Ahab mad, the talk of it on the boat aroused in him, a newcomer and a stranger, not only alarm, but also a vague, nameless horror. The whiteness of the whale, he says, was appalling. Why? Why does legend tell us of a

mystic white steed of the prairies? Or of a sacred white elephant? Or of a white bear? Or of the albatross? Why do creatures so "clad in snow" haunt us with suggestions of sublimity or terror? Why, finally, does an albino man repel and shock us? Ishmael suggests various explanations of this effect, each one of them calculated to increase the terror rather than to explain it. It is a poet's device for securing an emotional effect. But when the effect is once made, the poet permits himself one gorgeous paragraph of summary which we ought to quote as a sample of his writing at its most magnificent. He suggests that the whiteness itself, the absence of colour, or the presence of all colours, brings to some sensitive instinct in our heart the thought of space and emptiness; annihilation; death itself. And he raises one terrific question which colours the rest of the book for us—whether nature, if we could look at it with entirely clear vision, would not prove to be altogether white—that is, might it not prove to be an infinite emptiness? And whether light itself, essentially colourless, is not a merciful, if deceptive, sort of coloured glasses which enables us to guess at the blank void in which our fate is cast? This note of despair, of utter intellectual pessimism, is here introduced for artistic purposes, whether or not one cares to believe it philosophically. We enjoy the emotional slant it gives to the adventure with the whale, the personification of space and infinity, against which Captain Ahab in his madness is resolved to tilt without the aid of rose-coloured glasses of any kind. Melville says it in words worthy of the idea:

"Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when

beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it that as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour; and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues—every stately or lovely emblazoning—the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within, and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colourless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge—pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear coloured and colouring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things, the albino whale was the symbol."

No praise is too high for the literary skill which sustains so many ideas and incidents as a long prelude to one dramatic effect. The story of Ahab's first meeting with the whale and the influence of the episode on his life is only one of the preludes to the final encounter. The other incidents serve to develop a crescendo of apprehension. After the less menacing whales have been hunted successfully and the oil stored away on the ship, we begin to meet isolated prophecies of the final terror. The whale is seen at a distance. One remarkable afternoon a crystal-like fountain is observed far off. The crew note the exact time, fifteen and a quarter minutes past one o'clock. The sailors revive the old question whether the whale spouts water or only mist,

and Ishmael gives us the argument on either side. Our own mood, of course, is for an answer which will preserve the mystery of the strange brute. These spoutings would be too gross if the magnificent fountain glittering in the sunlight were such a heavy mass of water as the local fire engine can toss up. The poet expects us to lean to this side of the argument. At this stage in the story, three-quarters through, he knows we are already hoping that Moby Dick will prove a ghost. Ishmael gives his vote on the side of mist. Half humorously, yet with the intention to haunt the reader after all, he suggests a picture of the monster "... solemnly sailing through a calm tropical sea; his vast, mild head overhung by a canopy of vapour, engendered by his incommunicable contemplations, and that vapour glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon his thoughts."

At the end of the quest when the man and his horror meet, it takes three days to conclude the battle, as it took St. George three days in the old story to settle with the dragon. On the first day Moby Dick came at Ahab's boat, lifted it in his jaw and shook it. For that moment Ahab was alive and helpless, says Melville, in the very jaws he hated. In his madness he attacked the whale's teeth with his naked hands until the boat was snapped in two, and he was spared, temporarily, to fall into the sea. Round and round the shipwrecked crew Moby Dick swam in swift narrow circles, as though he intended to kill them all as soon as he had looked them over individually, and had called the roll, as it were, of his enemies. Perhaps he was making sure that Ahab was there. The old man from the water called to the men still on the ship to bear down on them and form a bulwark against the creature. But that time

Moby Dick swam suddenly away, and they could watch him spouting in the distance. All night they followed him, and though they lost sight for a short time, the next morning they came up with him again. When the boats were lowered, Moby Dick came straight for them as though he knew the errand and was resolved to finish the duel. Three harpoons entered his body. Maddened by the pain, and more perhaps by the insults, the white whale crossed and recrossed his own track until the three lines, hopelessly entangled, and shortened, and the three boats to which they were fastened, were drawn in towards the murderous jaws. Ahab saved his boat by cutting the line; the other two were flailed into matchwood by the gigantic tail, but it seemed that Moby Dick was aware at once that his chief enemy was escaping. For a moment he disappeared beneath the water. At once Ahab's boat seemed lifted to heaven by some mammoth hand thrust from the depths of the world. When it came down the men were spilled into the sea. At once, as though pleased with his day's work, the whale turned back upon his course and departed, without hurry and without other vestige of the encounter except for the intertangled lines which trailed after him. With so many boats smashed and with such narrow escapes, none but a madman perhaps would have pursued the quest, but Ahab will see it through. On the third day he drove the harpoon deep into Moby Dick's side, and the hunted creature, as though realizing his end was come, smashed the last boat, broke the line and then made straight for the ship. The sailors and the harpooners still on deck waited for the impact of his mighty skull. Useless to throw another harpoon now. The next moment would tell whether any of them would survive.

Before the ship goes down, Moby Dick, departing

with the lines still trailing behind him, entangles Ahab in a chance rope and carries him off to the sea's bottom. On the surface nothing is left but a few planks, and the lonely Ishmael. But by this time the reader feels that Ishmael is a symbol for his own soul, which the poet has transported through a voyage of beauty and terror.

XI

THE ORDEAL OF RICHARD FEVEREL

XI

THE ORDEAL OF RICHARD FEVEREL

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel is a masterpiece praised on several grounds. Some of us admire it as one of the best accounts we have of the conflict between the older and the younger generation. One of the best, that is, because it presents the conflict in its highest terms. When youth and its elders disagree over a sordid problem, or quarrel because one or the other is at fault, we may be sorry, we may consider them unfortunate, we may think them a nuisance, but we are not likely to see in their difficulties any epoch-making significance. But in this great story George Meredith has portrayed the two generations at their best. It is as though he says, see how hard it is for father and son to understand each other, even when both are as near perfection as our human nature permits. The difficulty is not one of their making, and it is incurable. No parent and his child can share the same approach to life. Other readers love the story as a prose-poem of nature; of human nature, if you will, but it is truer to Meredith's spirit to use the larger word. He sees us all carried by the vast stream of life which we like to say we control, but which we understand only in a small part. Richard's father tried to give him an education in harmony with nature, and good for the soul. He knows exactly what the soul is, but his beneficent disposition fails to recognize nature, and her operations

take place under his eye. In a sense Mother Nature becomes the tragic heroine of the story, not sufficiently loved by her children, and most inadequately understood. Still others praise the book as a dramatic statement of a great philosophy. Some story-tellers begin with a plot, or as we say, a yarn, and trust their observations of life to stimulate in us reflection of wisdom. In our day there have been many novelists who were philosophers first, like Meredith, and story-tellers afterwards, but they usually rest largely in the philosophic state, and their books make us feel that the author is lecturing to us on his point of view. So far as we know, no philosopher so thorough-going as Meredith has ever written a story so detached from himself, so capable of marching on its own feet. He does not lecture us nor lead us by the hand into the presence of his great ideas. We read first of all for the story, and gradually we are stirred to think about the ideas which prompted the story.

To praise *Richard Feverel* in these terms might frighten off some reader who is not prepared to enjoy a formidable book. We should repeat that the story itself is the prime interest, and what thinking we do as we read is a spontaneous pleasure. To think, and to enjoy thinking, is not always easy. Meredith's book, however, causes wisdom to spring up in us like a fountain.

We might consider the plot first. The story is of Sir Austin Feverel, a man of original ideas, indeed of some genius. He has concerned himself with the problem of educating the human race, and he applies his theories to his only son, whom he loves beyond anything living. The application of these theories constitutes the ordeal. Though Sir Austin would be too

modest to admit it, he has a remarkable gift for aphorisms, and he keeps a diary from which Meredith pretends to quote at intervals. It is called the Pilgrim's Scrip, and the title together with the fact that Sir Austin liked to set down his wisdom in brilliant and subtle phrases, may help us to see the exquisite side of his character. Outwardly he is a little cold and formal.

The part of his life which precedes the story of his son is meagrely sketched. It makes us think ironically that nature sometimes wastes her magnificent energies on poor material. Sir Austin had been married to a wife of considerable charm, and of an essentially good heart, but of a flighty temperament. She seems to have yearned after the romantic and the æsthetic. Her husband maintained in his household a friend whose worth he exaggerated, a second-rate poet. The wife was as poor a judge of men as she was of literature, and overlooking the superior literary qualities of the Pilgrim's Scrip, she lost her heart to the family laureate. When their affair was discovered, Sir Austin dropped them both from his acquaintance but not from his pay-roll. The minor poet had no objection to support from the man he had wronged. This experience did not sour the baronet's disposition; it was in his character to see things in the large, remembering that misfortunes and wrongs have after all only a small place in the constructive scheme of nature. Whatever his grief, he kept it to himself, and turned his attention to the young boy whom he was now to bring up alone. He decided to invent a system of education which would protect Richard from the accidents of this world, and from the temptations to which humanity is liable. A rather large order, one would think, but since our natural love for our children desires nothing less, why not believe that

somewhere in nature's scheme may lie a system to meet our desires? Sir Austin brought Richard up in the country with outdoor life, with all the sports, in the midst of books and culture, in a constant stimulation of ideas from his accomplished elders, but in segregation from other children, and in complete ignorance of those aspects of life we usually lump under the one word sex. Richard has companions, but no playmates. Young Ripton Thompson, the son of the family lawyer, does pay an occasional visit to the Hall, and of course there are one or two other boys, heirs of neighbouring estates. But Sir Austin's purpose was to save the innocence of boyhood from contamination. It was his hope to develop the body and all its instincts in a condition of health and strength until that point in adolescence should be reached when the passions explode in us and a sentimental life begins. At that moment—rather difficult to fix accurately—Sir Austin hoped to bring his son face to face with some ideal girl, equally well brought up. The theory was that the two young natures, unspoiled and hitherto unstimulated, would at sight reach a melting temperature. The result, of course, would be an ecstatic and lasting happiness, a love which would be identical with fate.

The difficulty with this programme was not that nature failed to co-operate, but that she rather overdid it. Just at the moment when Sir Austin had his back turned, looking up a fair paragon among the British aristocracy, Richard met Lucy Desborough, quite by accident. Of course, we reflect, not by accident, after all. Nature was fully as active in Richard's fortune as his father. We see clearly enough that the father will be disappointed in the boy, not because the girl isn't all that the fondest love could desire for the son, but

because she has been provided in this casual way, as though the system were not necessary. So the father withholds his approval of the hasty marriage, which though hasty is as beautiful as young wedlock could be. And this reluctance to welcome Lucy wrecks their happiness and his.

The plot is simple, then, but Meredith repeats the theme with variations, as a musician might do. Young Ripton, for example, is brought up by no system. He is, says Meredith, a boy without a character. He is not protected from his vulgar instincts, and at no time in the story is he a paragon of anything, yet nature somehow pulls him through on his own inferior plane. We catch ourselves asking whether there is not some marvellous wisdom behind even the accidents of stupidity and vulgarity. The question makes us think well of nature, but it makes men somewhat ridiculous.

The theme has another variation in the story of Lady Blandish, a very noble woman who, like Sir Austin, has failed of happiness in marriage, and who, like him, has not allowed the disappointment to embitter her character and lessen her faith in life. She is as well bred and as well poised as the baronet himself, and it is quite clear that she is in love with him. What he mistakes for frank friendship is a controlled passion. The baronet never finds out what he might have had for the asking, had he wanted it. In one scene of great comedy, he confides to Lady Blandish his intention of seeking a mate for Richard, and asks her to be mother to the boy in his absence. For a moment the poor woman thinks he is proposing. Perhaps it is her sense of humour that saves her when she discovers her mistake. He is moved, however, to kiss her hand in a courtly gesture of gratitude for her watchfulness over

his precious son. The son, by a miracle of irony, catches a glimpse of his father in this astounding pose, and the sight initiates him into the world of romance.

A more tragic variation is the fate of Claire, Richard's cousin, who loves him as desperately as Lucy does, but who fails to make an impression on him. Nature is extremely wasteful. Sometimes we say that her great energies spend themselves on an evil result, but the more terrible fact is that her impulses often seem to come to no conclusion at all. She overdoes Sir Austin's system, as we said; far more people fall in love with the same object than is at all necessary.

We soon discover in any one of Meredith's novels that he does not give us characters absolutely bad or absolutely good. In a sense he has no heroes, and in a sense no villains. The total effect of any of his stories is a highly moral one—an increase in us of the desire to find out truth and right. But he knows that the extremes of good and bad are mixed in all of us. When he shows the relation, therefore, between Sir Austin Feverel and his son, we should be hasty indeed if we concluded that one is right and the other wrong. A large part of the beauty of the story comes from our persuasion that even when Richard and his father make mistakes they do so with good intention and that their sins do lie in the domain of error.

We first see them opposed in the episode of Farmer Blaize's hayrick, a complete story by itself, or perhaps we should say a poem of parental wisdom and moral sublimity. Few things in our language are more moving for anyone who has faced the problems of moral education. Richard and his friend, Ripton, mere boys, had gone hunting one afternoon, and, without intending to do so, had poached on the property

of Farmer Blaize. When he found them at it, and ordered them off the premises, they felt insulted and made a defiant reply. He settled the matter by horse-whipping them on the spot, and the proud young aristocrat saw no possible course but to take a thorough revenge. Accident puts into his head the idea of firing the farmer's hayrick. Sir Austin discovers his son's guilt, but wisely determines that the boy must confess of his own volition, and from his own sense of right and wrong must swallow his pride and apologize to the farmer. The steps by which this conclusion was brought about one does not hesitate to say are a masterpiece of story-telling, with an insight into human nature and a vision of morality hard to match anywhere. Meredith is a great poet even in his prose, and the conclusion of this episode, the passage which tells how the father stood outside the farmer's cottage while his boy went in and played a man's part, is more like a lyric than a paragraph in a novel. Nature, there in the night, was in sympathy with this new health of the soul, and "the wind that bowed the old elms and shivered the dead leaves in the air had a voice with meaning for the baronet during that half-hour's lonely pacing up and down under the darkness, awaiting his boy's return. The solemn gladness of his heart gave Nature a tongue. Through the desolation flaring overhead he caught intelligible signs of the beneficent order of the universe." Meredith says he went home and made a new entry in the Pilgrim's Scrip: "There is for the mind but one grasp of happiness; from that uppermost pinnacle of wisdom, whence we see that this world is well designed."

Sir Austin, however, shows his weakness in the other great episode in which he and his son are opposed.

Meredith puts the hayrick first, not only because it comes so in the chronology, but because it establishes our respect for the baronet and our confidence in his wisdom on most occasions. But when he has gone to London to seek out a daughter-in-law and learns from his various correspondents at home that Richard and Lucy have been seen walking about the estate and boating on the river, he loses his perspective and makes a wreck of what had been his own nearest ambition. He sends for Richard to come to London immediately. The boy arrives with all his usual confidence in his father, ready to confide in him the momentous truth that Lucy and Richard, destined for each other's arms since the beginning of the world, have found their mate. Sir Austin, however, knowing all the facts, and having every advantage of strategy, tries to laugh the boy out of his romance. He tells Richard how foolish young men are when they are in love, especially when they are in love for the first time. Speaking from his own bitter experience, he implies that women are not always what they seem, and one had better be careful. "He sketched the Foolish Young Fellow—the object of general ridicule and covert contempt. He sketched the Woman—the strange thing made in our image, and with all our faculties. He harped upon the Foolish Young Fellow, till the foolish young fellow felt his skin tingle and was half suffocated with shame and rage." What Richard got from this discourse was the unalterable conviction that his father did not know what love was, and never could know, and that to speak to a man so blind of a romance so sacred as his, would be impiety. The rift was created once for all between the older and the younger generation.

In all the remaining encounters between the boy and

his father Meredith lets us feel they are engaged in a kind of litigation, arguing their case in terms of unreal codes. The baronet, without realizing his own vanity, is justifying his system as much as trying to save his son, and Richard, instead of arguing for the facts, is trying to justify his own pride and his estrangement from his father.

Those who love the book for the study it contains of nature, emphasize either the use that Meredith makes of actual scenes and weather, or else the subtle play throughout the novel of those impulses in us, hard to name but impossible to resist, which in the large we call Nature, and in detail psychology, instinct or emotion. The quickest way to appreciate Meredith's use of scenery is to contrast it with the methods of another great nature-lover, Thomas Hardy, or instead of Hardy we might cite Walter Scott. In the Scott-Hardy type of story the scene is actually painted with detail and with the complete effect of a picture. You can see it even before the human beings arrive on the stage. Hardy's immense moors, Walter Scott's lakes and mountains, Fenimore Cooper's forests and prairies, are pictures in themselves. Meredith, however, sees and feels nature through his characters; he remembers that for most of us the largest part of any landscape is our feeling about it, our mood at the moment. If we are in a cheerful mood, the sunlight on a bright day makes us understand the harmony of the universe; if we are despondent, it indicates to us the irony of nature; if we are deep in love, the particular spot where we are losing our heart is transfigured. Other eyes might see it by the side of a sluggish stream, but for us the spot is the coast of paradise. If Meredith had confined himself only to scenery, we should have concluded that in

his thought nature was a sort of illusion, a mirage of our temperament. So far as the landscape is concerned, this is perhaps what he thinks, and it would be difficult to contradict his conclusion by any theory which took full account of our common experiences. But nature for him means also the stream of impulses in emotion's conduct—a stream which seems immensely complex, but which on ripe acquaintance turns out to be if no less mysterious, at least more simple. In this book, for example, we see almost all the ways in which man falls in love. There is Richard, losing his heart to Lucy. His love-affair is highly poetic even though in its early stages we are able to smile at it. There is Lady Blandish, the very intelligent and admirable woman who in middle life falls in love with Sir Austin, even though she realizes his lack of humour. There is Tom Blaize, the farmer's son, a lout who loses his heart to Lucy and gives evidence of his passion by reading old fashion-books of women's apparel which had belonged to his mother. There is Claire, Richard's cousin, who loves him in vain, and dies of a broken heart. There is Mrs. Mountfalcon, the adventuress, who is employed to snare Richard while the villain of the story makes love to his wife, and who in spite of herself falls in love with the boy. When we consider all these cases and the others in the book, we begin to see that there is less variety than we at first thought. There is one way of love in nature, but it seems different only as it appears in different temperaments. Perhaps it is the beginning of wisdom in us to recognize the simple principles of life of which we are the infinite variations. Those principles taken together are what Meredith understands by nature.

Richard's falling in love with Lucy is the one large

illustration in the story; the boy has come to the age when he needs only a hint from life to develop a sentimental existence. That hint is supplied by the sight of his father bending over Lady Blandish's hand and kissing it. The baronet had just told her his intention to search in London society for his destined daughter-in-law, and has asked the lady to be a mother to Richard in his absence. Until the last words of the conversation she labours under the impression that he is about to propose to her and of course she is ready to accept him. The baronet's reverent kiss is intended as mere courtly homage, but Richard, who has heard nothing of the conversation and catches merely a glimpse of this attitude, is fired by it to imagine a whole world of romance. All that he needs now is someone to fall in love with. Let young lovers say what they will about their destined mates, Meredith insists that nature's way is to supply the passion first and find an object for it afterwards. One begins to suspect that the first eligible object will do, and it is a matter of gratitude to nature that an object so eligible as Lucy immediately presents herself on the river bank to be loved fatally for evermore.

In the old pastorals, Daphnis and Chloe sit gazing into each other's eyes and brood on the mysterious dispensation of life which has brought them together, while the shepherd conveniently near pipes romantically on his flute. It is a sophisticated mind, of course, that can understand simultaneously with the two lovers that the piping is no more inspired than other noises in the ally beautiful, and that in itself, if love were withdrawn, the piping is no more inspired than other noises in the world. To understand this is to understand nature. Parents exaggerate the virtues of their children, and

they surely are intelligent enough to know that they exaggerate, yet they would be poor things if they saw the children literally without the halo of affection. Meredith represents the tryst of Richard and Lucy under the sophisticated chapter heading "A Diversion Played on a Penny Whistle." There will always be readers to say that he was cynical, but some of us think he was a great poet with a clear intelligence and a warm heart. Lucy and Richard are eager to meet, but when they are face to face they have little to say except to pronounce each other's names in ecstasy, to ask each other with insane persistence whether he or she really does love, to hold each other's hands and finally to reach the mystery of their first kiss. They are two children, if you please, the eternal Daphnis and Chloe. Over in the next pasture there happens to be a sheep-boy who has bought a penny whistle and is learning to play upon it. He is not a parody of the flute-player in the old pastoral; he is a parable of all human experience which we try to play on in our ignorance and which expresses only to those who are sympathetic the divine music we have in us to utter.

This episode of Richard's love for Lucy comes early in the book, and we sometimes feel disappointed that there is no repetition of it. Meredith's intention was to show us that when Richard went wrong later on, he, like his father, was following a code rather than the honest dictates of nature. He was caught in the traditions of his class and in the vanities of his own self-pride; as we say, he was untrue to himself. In fact, all the characters in the book, when they make mistakes, are shown to have been untrue to themselves. Meredith leaves with us the conviction that once we have made the elementary moral distinctions between right and

wrong, and have committed ourselves to do our best according to our lights, the heart may be a better light than the colder part of our intelligence. The instinctive Richard is a noble boy, and justifies that part of his father's training. The rational Richard, trying to think his way through a troubled problem, is foolish and, to himself and others, dangerous. The full weight of Meredith's thought on this relation of nature to goodness is felt in some of his poems, such as *A Reading of Earth*. But the poems are usually less easy to understand than the prose.

The philosophy of life which some lovers of the book find in it, and indeed in all of Meredith, is this view of nature just indicated, plus a great confidence in laughter—in the comic spirit. Meredith thinks that when we are in danger of losing the guidance of nature and of going astray after less reliable human codes, we can be saved if we keep the power to laugh at ourselves. Neither Sir Austin nor his son has a sense of humour; that is the true reason why their lives are tragic. For Meredith, no human being could be perfect—that is, fitted to be happy in an entirely moral world, unless the spirit of comedy was in him. The essence of comedy is the ability not only to laugh at the foibles of mankind, but first of all to identify yourself with the race before you smile. The comic spirit is a generous recognition of our own mistakes and shortcomings. Meredith takes pains to indicate the principle just after Sir Austin has ended his happy relations with his son. He is in London and is keeping Richard with him. Lady Blandish writes a delicious letter from the Hall telling what she has been able to accomplish in her interviews with Lucy. We have no difficulty in reading between the lines her love for the baronet, and even he cannot

escape seeing in the unwritten part of the letter the implication that a sense of humour would do him some good. She compared Byron with Wordsworth, saying that though the first was a bad man in some ways, she prefers him to the second. Byron reminded her of a beast of the desert, savage and beautiful. Wordsworth seemed a superior donkey, reclaimed from the heathen —a *very* superior donkey, she insisted, with great power of speech and great natural complacency, whose stubbornness must be admired as part of his mission. When he had read this extraordinary statement the baronet looked at himself in the mirror. Meredith says you could tell from his eyes that he was not looking at the outer self, but was taking an inventory of something inside of him which perhaps that shrewd woman was classing with the superior donkey. He was capable, Meredith says, of such great-mindedness, " and could snatch at times very luminous glances at the broad reflector which the world of fact lying outside our narrow compass holds up for us to see ourselves in when we will. Unhappily, the faculty of laughter, which is due to this gift, was denied him; and having seen, he, like the companion of friend Balaam, could go no farther."

Meredith understands that the comic sense is a positive virtue; that is, we instinctively admire the people who have it even though we may recognize their failings in other directions. Adrian Harley, the most important of the minor characters in the book, is a too worldly cousin whom the baronet has persuaded to stay in the family in order that Richard may have the benefit of his experience. Adrian lacks ideals; as the baronet says, his fault is that he overlooks the good side of his fellows. One might put the matter more strongly and

say that Adrian has no morals whatever. With him good manners count for more. Yet in spite of ourselves we like him, and the reason is that he alone in the book has a remarkable comic sense. He can prick the bubble of any illusion, and when he does so, though we detest him, he leaves a sting of common sense behind which we cannot forget. He is the only one in the story who can tease Richard about his love-affair without losing his confidence.

"She did all she could to persuade me to wait," emphasized Richard.

"Come, come, my good Ricky. Not all, not all!"

Richard bellowed, "What more could she have done?"

"She could have shaved her head, for instance."

This happy shaft did stick.

Meredith's idea is that the ability to see the humour of a situation liberates one from whatever inhibitions are due to false codes. The essential truth can withstand laughter. Of course there is a type of reader who will ask why he didn't bestow this divine gift of comedy on a good man like Sir Austin. Why did he give it to a rascal like Adrian, who thereby becomes somewhat admired as he certainly does not deserve to be. Meredith would reply that this type of reader is himself lacking in a sense of humour, and through that lack is unconsciously untrue to the facts of life. We do not find human beings equipped with all the virtues; nature seems to preserve a fair average among us. Adrian without his comic sense would indeed be nothing, a rake, a treacherous friend, a cynic. His comic sense saves him to some virtuous use in the world. Sir Austin with a comic sense would be a miracle of perfection, but miracles are rare, and the truth about nature with men as with the seeds she scatters in the

wind, is that her ways seem random and wasteful however simple may be the underlying principle which escapes us. It is a mean kind of morality which tries to make human nature tidy and logical in books, knowing perfectly well how different it is in life.

The gift for comedy in Meredith has suggested comparisons with Shakespeare and Chaucer. Certainly he belongs in their tradition, to that general tradition of wisdom and good humour in Europe illustrated by these two, by Montaigne, by La Fontaine. Those who share this spirit always have a tendency to look behind the superficial distinctions of society in the search for the genuine man. For that reason they like to associate in their stories the well-bred aristocrat and the tiller of the soil, whatever is refined and whatever is extremely natural—their purpose being not to suggest a contrast but to point out the universal operations of nature. Meredith is more subtly humorous than most other writers of this kind, probably because he is the most recent, and our age has grown sophisticated to satire and to comedy. It would be a pity if his subtlety were too great for some of his readers. We ought not to miss the parallel he sets up between Sir Austin and his butler, Benson. Benson seems more solemn and pompous than his employer, but probably is not so. The difference is in the sphere in which they operate. Benson spies on the love-affair of his young master and gets soundly thrashed for his impudence. There is no great difference, however, between his activities and the meddlesome ones of the father. Mrs. Berry, who has a far-off kinship with the Wife of Bath and with the old nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, is a broad commentary on Lady Blandish and Lucy, the other women whose hearts ache. It is easy to develop our comic sense at the

expense of Benson and Mrs. Berry because they are vulgar, and we know we ought to laugh at vulgarity. Beginning with them, however, we may pass on to smile at the well bred in the books, and as a last step in our education we may discover that the well bred are pictures of ourselves, and that we also might be smiled at in our best moments, if there is any onlooker wise enough to see how admirable we are and at the same time how far in error. Such an onlooker would be the ideal reader to whom Meredith appeals—you and I, when we have come to understand how wise this book is and how noble is the study of human nature which it contains.

XII
HUCKLEBERRY FINN

XII

HUCKLEBERRY FINN

"You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer'; but that ain't no matter," says Huckleberry Finn. He is quite right. We can understand his masterly story even if we have not read the book to which it is the sequel, but most Americans have read both, and a comparison of them helps us to see the greatness of the later one. In the preface to *Tom Sawyer* Mark Twain tells us he is drawing on his own memories of boyhood, and hopes to entertain young readers, but he adds that older folk may be interested in the picture of the Middle West, about 1850, and in the incidental record of the odd superstitions which were then prevalent among children and slaves.

In *Huckleberry Finn* the superstitions still appear, and the story certainly fascinates boys and girls, but mature readers value it for the rich picture of human nature, a satirical picture, if you will, but mellow and kind. In the preface to this book Mark Twain calls our attention to the various dialects the characters use, but it is hard not to believe his own interest was chiefly in providing us with our first and still our best account of Main Street—of the small community,

narrow as to their virtues and their vices, and starved in their imaginations, all but the children and the most childlike among them.

Since the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and the later book have the same background and much the same characters, it looks as though Mark Twain must have discovered his true subject during the eight years which separated the stories. Huckleberry Finn tells us far more than he knows; through his naïve confessions we see the panorama of his world and become sophisticated. We are really studying ourselves. In the earlier books, however, we have episodes of boyhood, rather loosely strung together, with one terrific stroke of melodrama to help out the plot. No doubt *Tom Sawyer* would be enjoyed by young people even if *Huckleberry Finn* did not lend it fame and keep it alive, but taken by itself it now seems a rather poorly-constructed book. The story is built up with anecdotes, each one complete in itself, and none developed beyond the point of the joke.

In his early book Tom Sawyer interests us by his love of mischief and by his exuberant fancy. He contrives more than the usual share of histrionics; other boys make believe, but Tom dramatizes his boyish sentimentality on the grand scale, and we have the suspicion that by emphasizing and isolating the boy, Mark Twain gets the total picture of life out of focus, and makes it difficult for us to interpret the exceptional events in terms of the normal parts of his story.

These comments on the earlier book may help us to see why we instinctively admire *Huckleberry Finn*. The same elements reappear, the same characters,

though new persons enter the tale, the same scene is described, though Huckleberry and the negro Jim have their chief adventures down the river on a raft, and the spirit of adventure in boyhood again is the central theme of the book. But this time the elements are arranged in a proportion which convinces us, and we are sure the picture is true.

When you sit down to write a novel, you find you must have something besides characters and a plot; you must have a philosophy of life. You must decide, for example, what parts of experience are worth writing about, and then you must make up your mind how to dispose of the other parts. Most men and women will take sides on the question whether it is the exceptional experience we should consider important, or whether any experience would seem exceptional if we attached importance to it. Our temperament dictates the answer, but we usually frame it in some kind of philosophy. There are novelists who believe that humdrum experience, the typical daily round of all of us, is the proper material for fiction, and that the novelists, by bearing down hard on it, may bring out the grain of significance under the smooth-worn surface. Another kind of artist portrays the average life remorselessly, to show that it is even less significant than it seems. He is the satirist, and he shows himself frequently in American literature to-day, a strong critic of narrowness and meanness, especially as observed in village life. A third kind of story-teller, with perhaps the same dislike of what is familiar and trite, turns resolutely to fresh material, to the unusual event; he looks, as we say, for an escape from the world which shuts him in.

In *Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain is all three kinds of story-teller at once. He gives us a kindly picture

of men and women in very small towns along the river, people with no heroic experience, who yet find their lives of considerable importance to themselves.

There is a satiric picture, too, an intermittent glimpse into the smallness of human nature. Huckleberry has learned how to make use of men by appealing to their mean side. When the two oarsmen come near the raft and almost discover the runaway slave, Huckleberry saves Jim by inviting them to come on board and minister to the crew. There's a mild case of smallpox, he explains, and the two men row away, after giving him forty dollars, to salve their conscience for thus denying the appeal of the sick.

The way in which the realistic elements and the satiric are combined with extraordinary adventure might well be the envy and the admiration of any novelist. The quiet river towns which Mark Twain remembered from his youth had something of the frontier still; violent death varied the monotony, from time to time, and the outcasts of older parts of the world chanced along, for shelter, or for a last opportunity to play their tricks in a place where they weren't known. The law-abiding portions of the community would condemn such interruptions of the peace, but they would also be fairly hardened to them. If a novelist tried to tell us now that the performance of the two quacks in *Romeo and Juliet*, or in the *Royal Nonesuch*, was ever accepted by any American community we should probably decline to believe him. But when we watch these rascals and their doings through the eyes of Huckleberry Finn, we are free to believe them as exceptional as we please, yet we understand perfectly why the boy took them for granted. Huckleberry has had a bringing-up which has prepared him to be surprised

at nothing. We know that his approach to life is peculiar; if his judgments are not those of the average person, we know why they aren't, and we know just how far they depart from the normal, and he has our sympathy. Mark Twain manipulated his material, therefore, so that the most outrageous melodrama could present itself as matter of fact, through the medium of Huckleberry's temperament, and even while we are rearranging the values, and discerning what the boy was blind to, we like him, and concede that he is true to life.

He is not supposed to be an average boy, like Tom Sawyer; he is the son of the village drunkard, a waif who grows up uneducated and uncared for, so far as the community can see. Parents warn their children not to play with him; the schoolmaster whips any boy who is caught in his society. He frankly smokes a corn-cob pipe; he always wears a tattered hat; trousers and shirt are all his dress; he carries a dead cat by the tail, because he considers a dead cat a treasure, and believes it is good magic.

Huckleberry is explained by his father. The elder Finn is as thorough a study of good-for-nothing propensities as we are likely to find in literature. Whenever he can, he drinks himself into a mad fit, and becomes rather dangerous. Huckleberry sits up all night in the hut on the island, with his father's gun in hand, for fear it may be necessary to blow his father's brains out. But in his sober moments the man is even uglier; when he asks Huckleberry next morning what he is doing with the gun, the boy knows he had better invent at once an elaborate lie about a thief who tried to get in during the night.

This extraordinary parent just escapes being lynched for a crime which, oddly enough, he didn't commit, but afterwards he is shot in the back during a drunken brawl in a disorderly house. Huckleberry is rather fond of his father—thoroughly afraid of him, of course, and critical of his worst excesses, yet disposed to enjoy the less dangerous periods of his society. From him and from nature has come all the boy's education. His father's temper taught Huckleberry the advantages of falsehood; lying is the better part of discourse, he thinks, one's natural protection against society. He is modest about it, he always believes that Tom Sawyer could make up a far handsomer story, being a superior boy who has had advantages, but we can't see much room for improvement in the gorgeous fables Huckleberry improvises at the slightest challenge of fate. His father's changeable moods taught him also to expect anything of life.

Huckleberry's mother does not exist, so far as the story is concerned. We may imagine her the victim of her husband's brutality, if we are so inclined, and we may endow her with enough virtues to account for her son's kind heart and gentle instincts. But Mark Twain is at his best when he leaves her history a blank. Huckleberry's isolation is complete, and we are under no compulsion to measure him by the accustomed traditions of society.

The handling of the romantic or melodramatic elements in the story can be admired from another angle also. Though the life of the small village may seem unduly quiet, it is the person from the city who chiefly finds it dull; the people involved in it often are aware of excitements. Of course the excitements

come at long intervals, and they are cherished most often as scandal. Every small community has its stories about this woman or that man, stories which are often wild enough and improbable, but they really happened. But if a whole and steady view of life seems to us desirable, we can admire the way in which Mark Twain allows us to enjoy the wild adventures of Huckleberry, and at the same time shows us, in the not too remote background, a just picture of the folks who will talk about such experiences, but to whom they will never come. It is extraordinary that this balance is preserved through so long a succession of wild episodes; but even at the end, we still are aware of some surprise when a new accident occurs, we still consider ourselves the inhabitants of a quite normal world.

Several technical devices for securing this sense of the normal, for convincing us that the eccentric character is eccentric, no matter how often he appears, can easily be recognized by any one who knows the formulas of literary criticism. We can see, for example, that the characters speak for themselves. Though Huckleberry is telling the story, he reports conversations fully, and rarely makes a comment. This is the ancient rule for rendering character vividly, but it is easier to state the principle than to follow it. When the two rascals, driven out of town simultaneously by enraged mobs, happen to meet on the raft, Huck and Jim are wise enough to say nothing until the new arrivals disclose themselves. The younger man, diagnosing their simplicity, as he thinks, breaks the news that he is a duke in disguise, and that his rank entitles him to the only comfortable bed in the raft. Jim and Huck don't care; they know

he isn't a duke, but he might as well have the bed. The older man, however, is not so complacent, and in a few moments he has confessed that he is really the lost Dauphin of France, by rights a king. The conversations of the king and the duke are among the great passages of dramatic satire. They know they are not fooling each other, they pretend to be deceiving the negro and the boy, and yet we half think they would have kept up the nonsense even if they had been alone, so strong in them was the instinct for imposture. The device is the strictly dramatic one of omitting comment and letting the characters talk, but the formula is used here by a genius.

It would be in the sound tradition of criticism to say also that Mark Twain established a human scale throughout by descriptions of nature. The broad and changing river, the starry nights, the fogs, the glorious storms, refer us constantly to a scheme of things against which man even at his best would seem small. When the first heavy rain makes the river rise, and sweeps away whole villages in the flood, Huck and Jim paddle over to a rather substantial wreck of a house and climb in through the window. Wise as he is in much wickedness, Huckleberry seems not to know what sort of house this was before it was swept away, but we see clearly enough. At the time he doesn't know that the murdered man they find in a corner of the room is his own father. We are too much interested ourselves, perhaps, in the description of the room and in the finding of the corpse to grasp the full irony, but later it comes upon us, the contrast between that mighty flood and the wretched occupations it put an end to.

But when we have said this about the descriptions

of nature in the story, we ought to add that perhaps Mark Twain put them in for no other reason than his love of them. To joy in grand aspects of weather is so evident that their effect on the story may well have been a happy result, not altogether intended. It is a pagan love of nature—and we might say, a typically American love of the thing for itself, without asking what it means.

The book owes more of its fame than we sometimes recognize to the portrait of the negro, Jim, who runs away from a good home and from the neighbourhood of his wife and children because he has reason to fear he may be sold down the river. He is the one elaborate picture we have of the negro slave before the war, and in a community in which owner and slave alike take slavery very much for granted. Mrs. Stowe's famous book is full of correct observation; she gives us no doubt a fair account of slavery at its happiest—along with other reports which some Southerners will always think exaggerated. But *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remains a discussion of slavery as an issue in justice; the problem colours every sentence in the book. There must have been thousands of families in which the issue never suggested itself. That is the version of slavery which Mark Twain has given us—the picture of good Christian homes in which the slaves were as natural an incident as any other human relation. Even as propaganda, if *Huckleberry Finn* had been written early enough to serve that purpose, it would have been more subtly convincing than Mrs. Stowe's book, for the dramatic method, without preaching of any kind, here stirs the emotions deeply.

One of the moving themes of the story is Huck's uneasiness over the fact that by accident he is helping

a "nigger" to run away. He has his own code of morality where property is concerned; he doesn't wish to be a thief. The refinements of honesty, so to speak, he had learned from his father, who always said it was wrong to take what was another man's, unless you had the intention of paying it back some time. When he and Jim found themselves obliged to rob orchards and gardens, in order to maintain life, they quieted their conscience by making it a rule never to steal all they could. Crab-apples, for instance, they always left untouched. But when it came to stealing niggers! On the other hand, when he thought of Jim's kindness to him, of the negro's terror of the plantations from which he could never hope to return to his wife and children, Huckleberry was in a tangle. He did go so far as to write to Miss Watson and tell her where Jim could be found, but he couldn't bring himself to post the letter. "It was a tight place. I took it up and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, for ever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"'All right, then, I'll *go* to hell,' and tore it up."

Though our sympathy for the slave is profound, we are allowed to see the negro on more sides of his character than Mrs. Stowe may have been aware of. She knew that the coloured race was deeply religious. but she took religion to mean the reading of the Bible and the attendance on a Christian church. Uncle Tom is religious in this sense. What we have more recently learned to appreciate, the wealth of folk-lore, superstition and mysticism which still seems to be the inheritance of negroes, even when they live among the whites,

Mrs. Stowe did not portray. Mark Twain makes the most of it; he shows us the African in Jim, the ignorance which to the casual white seems absurd, but which really is connected with powers the white does not share. Altogether he is a wonderful creation, the more remarkable for the matter-of-fact way in which he is presented, without emphasis or exaggeration. He does not take the important place in the scene—Huckleberry remains the hero of the story, but when we have laid the book down, the patient inscrutable black, with his warm heart and his childlike wisdom, remains not the least vivid of our memories.

Whether the portrait of the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, in their famous feud, is true to historical fact, those must decide who know the regions of the South before the war where this feud is supposed to occur. But there is no question that the persons seem real, and that the satire on the follies of human nature bites rather deep in this part of the story. Here again the fact that Huckleberry is telling the story serves to secure a splendid literary effect. Nothing in the book is told with greater restraint, and nothing is quite so tragic. The restraint is art, but it seems the work of nature, because Huck wishes, as he says, to hurry over the details—he tries not to remember them for fear they may spoil his sleep. Yet out of the tragedy the reader seizes a noble emotion. When you reflect on the wickedness of feuds and duels, as on the wickedness of war, you may be troubled that a noble emotion should be roused by such material, but when you let yourself go uncritically you can enjoy the courage, the chivalry, the romance which Mark Twain has put into this episode.

At the end of the story Tom Sawyer reappears.

He comes to the place where Jim has been captured as a runaway slave, and Huck is hoping to contrive an escape. Tom happens to know that Jim is no longer a slave, but a freeman. The idea of getting him out of his prison, however, is too fruitful to be resisted; Tom begins to make believe—the log cabin becomes a dungeon—the methods of release must be as elaborate as though there were a moat and high walls to cross, and valiant guards to beat down. From this point on, the story lags. The adventures which Tom imagines are cheap after the real dangers Huck and Jim have gone through. We wonder whether this effect of anticlimax was accidental or intended. Did Mark Twain wish to draw his comparison between the genuine experience and the fanciful? Whether he did or not, the contrast is there.

For that reason I have thought it not unjust to compare the two stories to the advantage of *Huckleberry Finn*. We always think of them together, and here at the close of his masterpiece the author sets the two boys side by side for us to look at. *Tom Sawyer* is a fine story, but the other is one of those books which occur all too rarely in a national literature, a book so close to the life of the people that it can hold any reader, and yet so subtle in its art that the craftsman tries to find out how it was done. I don't see why we shouldn't recognize it as a masterpiece now, without waiting for posterity to cast any more votes. Indeed, we thought a while ago that the ballot was closed. But recently it has been suggested that Mark Twain, poor man, missed his full development as an artist, that American life in his time was not sophisticated enough in matters of art to demand of him perfect workmanship, or to applaud when he gave it. Well, that sort of argu-

ment breaks down when we ask to see what men have written who were more fortunately placed than he, and when we set their work beside his. Some things he wrote will suffer by the comparison, but not *Huckleberry Finn.*

XIII
CANDIDA

XIII

CANDIDA

The genius of George Bernard Shaw has so many sides that we sometimes forget his pre-eminence as a dramatist. He is a sage, a wit, a critic of life, and a prophet of the modern world. He is a reformer, a lover of his kind, who, if he could, would change society a great deal in the hope of improving it even a little. He has a genius for publicity, so that his person and his character are known in many lands, and from this point of view we often think of him as in himself a sort of work of art, an ornamental embellishment of our times. But in literature, in the field in which he will be remembered after the other apparitions of him have been forgotten, he is a great dramatist, probably the greatest English dramatist in many decades.

So many of his comedies have found success on the stage that familiar illustrations of his genius might be chosen to suit every temperament. He has written plays in which the propaganda spirit is strong, or the satirical spirit. He has written some pieces which satirize nothing in particular, but which seem to poke fun at his own times—in particular at the audience which attends the performance. Perhaps this part of his work illustrates the genius for getting our attention, even when there is not much to attend to. But to observe him at his best we should turn to a masterpiece like

Candida, in which there is no propaganda, nothing erratic or over-emphasized, nothing, in fact, but an honest and profound concern with human nature—the subject-matter of all great comedy.

Other plays of George Bernard Shaw are wittier than *Candida*, and some have a more exciting plot. Most competent judges, however, who have followed the stage in Europe and America for the last twenty-five years, would say that *Candida* is probably the best comedy in our era, and one of the few modern plays which have a good chance of permanence. They would justify that point of view by calling attention to the simplicity of the plot, which though simple is really dramatic—that is, exciting when presented on the stage, and which in its very simplicity is true to the average run of our experience. They would remind us that the characters, though not heroic, are on the other hand not deplorable or mean; they are people like ourselves. And it is neither the plot nor the characters which in the end seem important—rather we go away from the play thinking of human nature in general, of mankind recently inspected beneath a fresh light. Our thoughts on this large subject, we notice, are kindly as well as keen. They are not our thoughts, however, but Mr. Shaw's, and the kindly emotion also is his.

We notice one other thing about the impression which *Candida* leaves with us. There is in it a certain brilliant clarity which must be explained, not only by straight thinking, but by the absence of certain kinds of sentiment to which we are accustomed. Oddly enough this dramatist, though he seems characteristic of our age, does not choose to occupy himself with sex, nor with the sentiments which sex prompts. We are supposed to exaggerate the importance of such themes

to-day, but Mr. Shaw, however typical of us otherwise, always accepts the relations of men and women as a foregone conclusion, often builds his plot upon them, but substitutes a world of ideas and criticisms for the picture of their intimate experiences. In *Candida*, therefore, we notice at once that we are dealing with the familiar triangle—two men in love with the same woman, but we notice also that what interests Shaw, and what he interests us in, is not really the private life of these people, but rather the thoughts they suggest about the common fate of us all.

Among the chief characters in the play is the Reverend James Mavor Morell, a clergyman of the English Church, who entertains, as he thinks, advanced social ideas. He is possessed of a good heart, and a second- or third-rate brain. He knows he has the good heart, but has no suspicion that his intelligence is less than first-rate. His self-satisfaction is the inevitable result of his great success in his parish, and of his popularity among his neighbours. His piety is unobtrusive, and his good nature is unfailing. As his father-in-law tells him, there is no reason why he shouldn't in time become a bishop. Much of his success is due, perhaps, to his energetic cheerfulness, to his wholesome personality, and to his eloquence. His eloquence consists of platitudes beautifully enunciated. The man has a certain kind of common sense, and he is in no respect a hypocrite, but he is not intelligent enough to recognize what are his real interests in life. Benevolence and practical religion make up, he thinks, his one passion. In fact, however, he loves his popularity and his success, as he loves his wife and children, and as he is fond of his typist and his assistant minister. His world is smaller than he realizes, and he

is unaware of anything beyond. The emotions of the spirit concern him little.

His wife, Candida, is slightly his superior. The difference consists largely of whatever advantage a woman's intuitions give her over masculine processes of thought. She is really not more intelligent, and she has no more than he a deep spiritual concern in life, but she has enough shrewd wit to handle any situation that she and her husband are ever likely to get into. Her father is a decidedly vulgar person, mean in his ideals and obtuse in his manners. Morell would never have wasted five minutes on him if the old gentleman had not been the father of Candida. Just how Candida rose above the unprepossessing manners of her father is not explained, nor does it need to be. A certain type of reader will say she must have had a rather gifted mother who bequeathed good looks and admirable impulses. But Shaw would probably be content if we say merely that she has a woman's cleverness for adapting herself to the best world she aspires to, and a woman's preference for refined manners. In her own household she has gained, especially with her husband, the prestige of courageous frankness, tempered, of course, by courtesy. She herself believes she faces life always with intelligence and candour. It grows clear, however, as the play proceeds, that like her husband she usually mistakes platitudes for insights. Her frank observations of the world are old as the hills, in no respect subtle, and perhaps they mean something other than she intends.

The Reverend Mr. Morell has a typist, Proserpine Garnett, who looks up to him as a god. You can see with half an eye she is in love with him, but he has not discovered it and never will. In many ways she is the

most respectable member of the household. Her ideas of decorum would probably condemn any other minister who dabbled in such wild ideas as even Mr. Morell's innocent kind of socialism. Her affection shows itself chiefly in acid comments on the assistant minister, and also on Candida. Miss Garnett's deep passion has opened her eyes to the fact that Candida is overrated by her husband. She expresses her opinion to the assistant minister: "I have no feeling against her. She's very nice, very good-hearted: I'm very fond of her and can appreciate her real qualities far better than any man can. You think I'm jealous. Oh, what a profound knowledge of the human heart you have, Mr. Lexy Mill! How well you know the weaknesses of Woman, don't you? It must be so nice to be a man and have a fine penetrating intellect instead of mere emotions like us, and to know that the reason we don't share your amorous delusions is that we're all jealous of one another!"

The assistant minister, the Reverend Alexander Mill, is a graduate of Oxford. He has spent some time in a university settlement in the east end of London, where he has tried to make his university culture operate for the benefit of the poor. He has an overwhelming admiration for his chief, and he enjoys the contempt of Miss Garnett, who has made up her mind he will never imitate Morell's success. She is quite right. Mr. Mill is probably better educated than Morell, and his social advantages have been greater, but he lacks personality and confidence in himself. He is in that unfortunate state of mental development which is on its guard against platitudes, but has as yet no original ideas to put in their place.

Within this little world, one has a feeling, Mr. Morell

will spend all his days. Perhaps he won't become a bishop, after all, or if he does, he will carry his little world with him into the bishopric. His main task, as he sits in his study at the beginning of the play, is to find a spare date for another lecture on Christian Socialism. He is already booked up weeks ahead. Broad-minded as he is, he speaks whenever he is asked, always keeping himself free, of course, on Sundays to attend to the church services. The dialogue between the minister and his secretary is typical of Shaw's dramatic skill. It gives us a list of his engagements, of course, but it tells about the man.

Proserpine. Another lecture?

Morell. Yes, the Hoxton Freedom Group want me to address them on Sunday morning (*great emphasis on "Sunday" this being the unreasonable part of the business*). What are they?

Proserpine. Communist Anarchists, I think.

Morell. Just like Anarchists not to know that they can't have a parson on Sunday! Tell them to come to church if they want to hear me: it will do them good. Say I can only come on Mondays and Thursdays. Have you the diary there?

Proserpine. Yes.

Morell. Have I any lecture on for next Monday?

Proserpine. Tower Hamlets Radical Club.

Morell. Well, Thursday then?

Proserpine. English Land Restoration League.

Morell. What next?

Prosperine. Guild of St. Matthew on Monday. Independent Labour Party, Greenwich Branch, on Thursday. Monday, Social-Democratic Federation, Mile End Branch. Thursday, first Confirmation Class—— Oh, I'd better tell them you can't come. They're only half a dozen ignorant and conceited costermongers without five shillings between them.

Morell (amused). Ah; but you see they're near relatives of mine, Miss Garnett.

Proserpine. Relatives of yours!

Morell. Yes: we have the same father—in Heaven.

Proserpine. Oh, is that all?

One can imagine the success of each one of Morell's addresses, the general approval of the audience, the manipulation of phrases by which he will manage to give the effect of intellectual speculation, and please all hearers without changing the ideas of any of them. After the play is over, we know that this life will resume itself and continue as though it had never been interrupted.

Into this world fate injects for a while a disturbing element. One evening Morell finds an unfortunate young man starving on a park bench. The unfortunate man is a poet, Marchbanks. He is a nephew of an earl, a fact not lost on Morell and his wife. But his distinguishing characteristic is less his ancestry than his complete inability to do anything practical. At the moment when Morell found him starving he had a note for fifty-five pounds in his pocket, but didn't know how to cash it. For Morell it is easy to be benevolent to a tramp who is an earl's nephew and has fifty-five pounds in his pocket, and he insists on making Marchbanks a guest in his house, almost a member of the family. One gets the impression that from the beginning this arrangement was distressing to the poet, not because he objected to have people look after him, but because at first sight he came to a true estimate of Morell. Being a poet, he idealized Candida, and being this particular poet, Marchbanks, he decided she was not happy with her husband—an extraordinary flight of fancy. He is the one really frank person in the play, as indeed only people with a great deal of imagination can be entirely frank. His observations are often wrong, but he tells the truth about himself as well as others. He knows he is impractical and somewhat of a coward, but he has an immense urge to clarify matters by having it out with

his fellow man on every subject. He therefore explains to Candida that she is too good for her husband; that her husband does not appreciate her sensitive nature; perhaps he cannot even appreciate her beauty. Candida, though a most remarkable woman, is after all a human being, and it is not entirely unpleasant for her to hear her case diagnosed in formulas so complimentary. Without the least intention of being unfaithful to her husband, she permits the poet to make love to her, very much as she would permit the household dog to lick her hand.

At this point the play proper begins. Morell asks the poet to stay to lunch, but Marchbanks declines. When pressed for an explanation, he screws up his courage and unburdens his heart; his conscience will permit silence no longer. He is in love with Candida. At this news Morell is benevolently amused. Everybody loves his wife, he says, why not the poet too? Anger and perhaps disgust supply Marchbanks with a little more confidence, and he expresses his horror to think what Candida must have gone through all these years, putting up with her husband, with his selfishness, his self-sufficiency, his universal stupidity. Though Morell at first believes he can patronize the poet and explain away his remarks, in the end Marchbanks develops extraordinary persistence, and finally drives into the minister's head the idea that Candida in her heart perhaps despises him. From this point his impulse is to proceed with the technique of men of his sort, not by argument, but by physical force. He offers to throw Marchbanks out of the house, and the poet is obviously scared; but as she remarks, fear is of two kinds, and the minister is really more afraid of him in the intellectual world than he is of the minister in the physical.

This is the first idea that Morell has met with in the progress of the play, and because of it, he suddenly finds himself in the poet's power. He tells Marchbanks to stay to lunch, as usual, since if he goes, Candida will not understand, and her husband will have to explain what has happened; he will have to explain that Marchbanks has behaved like a blackguard. But Marchbanks rises to the prospect with great enthusiasm—Candida must know that he has behaved like a blackguard. If her husband doesn't tell her, he will tell her himself—he will write it to her. When she knows he has behaved like a blackguard, she will understand him, and she will know that he understands her. This is too subtle for Morell, who discerns a tragic chasm opening before his feet. The first act ends as these three go in to lunch, and we are left with the expectation that the two men are about to fight it out for the woman.

When the curtain rises on the second act, it is evident, however, that the two men have not yet come to an understanding. Apparently Candida does not know what issue has arisen in the household, and Morell hasn't told her. We see Marchbanks waiting for Candida or her husband to come in, and passing the moments in talking with the typist. The poet, relying on his intuition, suspects a kindred spirit in Miss Proserpine, and tries to compare his experience in love with hers, to her annoyance and embarrassment. The father-in-law enters, and by his vulgarity increases the sense Marchbanks has of Candida's unhappiness in an uncongenial atmosphere. When Candida and her husband come in, Candida is much occupied with details of the household, especially with the wretched obligation to prepare onions for the evening meal. Horrified

that such matters should concern such an angelic creature, the poet goes out to the kitchen to see if he can be of any help. Meanwhile Morell sends a telegram cancelling a speaking engagement for that evening. He has no intention of leaving the house at so critical a moment.

When Candida finally gets a moment of quiet conversation with her husband, she broaches the great problem from her point of view, not knowing what is going on in his mind. She says she is much worried about the poet. She knows that everybody loves her husband, all the women especially, but Marchbanks has never been loved as he deserves. The minister braces himself for some tragic news. Candida, evidently inspired by the poet's ideas of life, asks her husband whether in his opinion she ought not to love Marchbanks. If she doesn't, she is much afraid he will be loved by other and inferior women who will give him the wrong idea of the noble passion. Her poor husband sees in these words a design, which, of course, is far from her thoughts. He might have found out at once how much or how little she knew of the situation, if the curate at that moment had not returned, much disturbed because the evening's engagement had been cancelled. The particular audience, now to be disappointed, had prepared an elaborate meeting, and would soon be in their seats, expecting the popular orator. Morell, unable to give off-hand a good reason why he cancelled the engagement, is at last persuaded by the household to go and make his speech. To give him greater courage they will all go with him—the vulgar father-in-law, in the hope of meeting someone who may be useful in business; the typist and the curate out of dog-like affection; Candida and the poet, to fill up the chairs and

make a good audience. Morell consents, but he is uneasy at his own cowardice; it shames him to realize that the poet has him badly frightened. In a sudden spasm of courage he insists that his wife and Marchbanks stay behind and spend the evening together. The poet mutters his admiration of such magnanimity, but it is quite clear from an agonized remark of Morell's that his motive is chiefly pride. "He knows I am afraid of him: he told me so this morning. Well, I shall show him how much afraid I am by leaving him here in your custody, Candida." Candida is altogether embarrassed by this arrangement, the purpose of which she doesn't understand. Her husband goes out elated at his own great-mindedness.

When the third act opens the poet has been reading to Candida his own poetry, and the works of some other writers. Candida has had great difficulty in keeping awake. It may be as she still thinks, that she and Marchbanks are kindred souls, but as she says, there are limits to an appetite for poetry—even his poetry. Two hours of it is enough. She would prefer to talk. But Marchbanks refuses to engage in conversation. The fact is, he has been reading this verse, not out of vanity, but in order to be as magnanimous as the minister. According to his explanation later, his code of honour prevents him from making love to another man's wife from the moment the man has given him permission.

When Morell returns, highly gratified with the success of his meeting, the sight of his wife and Marchbanks together brings him to earth again, face to face with his problem. He must have a long talk with the poet; he must know just what has happened. If Candida wants the poet, of course she can have him,

but Morell thinks he has a right to know his fate quickly. Marchbanks is now as intoxicated with his own magnanimity as the minister was with his when he went off to the meeting, and it is some time before any specific news can be got out of him. He prefers to state his frame of mind in soaring phrases. When at last he is pinned down to something specific, he explains to the unhappy husband that nothing has been said about love; that he has analysed the situation to its depths, and has come to the conclusion that neither he nor Morell is worthy of Candida. He proposes that they both give her up. Why should she have to choose between a wretched little nervous disease like him, and a pig-headed man like Morell? At this point Morell's nerves begin to break, and he wonders if anyone in the house has remained sane. He begins to ask who will look after Candida if she has gone mad? Who will be a father to her children? Who will protect her?

These traditional problems recall the poet from his dream and make him rather angry. He proposes that they send for Candida and let her choose between them. Candida comes in at the moment and takes charge of the meeting. The two men are sharply reduced to explanations. She doesn't understand why Marchbanks has been scolding her husband, and why the minister is so wrought up. But by the way in which she comments on the words of both, and especially by her amusement when she learns that the poet had been proposing to her husband for her hand, we see how normal her emotional reactions are, and how very little daring there has been, after all, in her ideas. Forced to make a decision, of course she chooses to stay with her husband, and the reason she gives is

perfectly satisfactory to the poet and to herself; she believes it sincere. She says that the poet is the stronger man; he has an eye for truth; he sees things as they are. Since she is a woman, it is her duty not to go with the stronger, but to protect the weak; she will continue to look after her husband.

The decision is eminently satisfactory to the poet because it flatters him. She tries to give him a further word of comfort as he goes out—at least she tries to take away the sting of his unrequited love by a little common sense. Her well-meant effort shows how completely she misunderstands him. She asks how old he is, and reminds him that he can make a little poem out of two sentences and say them to himself every day. The sentences are, "When I am thirty, she will be forty-five. When I am sixty, she will be seventy-five." What the poet wanted all along, as he himself had recognized some time before, was the privilege of worshipping her, of being in love, and of course he can have that as well one place as another. He departs quite content.

Candida also is contented. We get the impression that she thinks she has made a splendid sacrifice of something or other. On second thought, however, we realize that she has gravitated towards the comfortable and the obvious. What would have happened to her if she had married the poet? A few hours of the wild life Marchbanks would have provided for her, would have disgusted them both. She has not thought this out, but after all, she is a creature essentially of the same impulses as her husband and her father, and in their world the line of least resistance is followed, even in spiritual matters, and even when they think they are making a difficult and noble choice. A much greater

earthquake than several poets, one feels, will be needed to disarrange the even accord of Candida's life. As for Morell, we have seen him torn by two great problems; one was whether he should give up his wife to another man; the other was whether he should give up the evening's engagement to make a speech. He might have given up his wife, but he was easily persuaded to make the speech. In a sense, he has been upset by both experiences. While the poet was on the premises making trouble for him, he was deeply stirred, but we wonder whether he will remember the episode after a year or so. Or we wonder how he will remember it. Undoubtedly with himself as the central actor, magnanimously solving a most unpleasant difficulty, and protecting his family from disruption.

The effect of the play, as in all of Shaw's comedies, and as in all great comedies, is to make us wiser about human nature in general, especially about ourselves. If the story were only satire, we should be able to laugh at these people, whose lives for a moment have been uncovered before us. We could laugh at them without feeling sympathy, and without seeing a relation between their foibles and our own character. But though Shaw has a reputation for biting wit, he has the imagination and the good humour which make comedy. The behaviour of these people amuses us, but we do not laugh at them. They are too much like ourselves for that. Rather we begin to search our own conscience to see how far what has been indicated in them is true of us. When we have observed, for example, that a frank proposal of a third person to a devoted husband that his wife should be transferred for the sake of her happiness, can easily be forgotten in the lives of these people, we can say momentarily that they are shallow

folk. But then we go on to wonder if we would take it more tragically. Isn't it true, we begin to ask, that though we may go looking for excitement in our lives, and hoping that a great upheaval may come our way, when it almost does come and then avoids us, are we not greatly relieved? Shaw clearly thinks this, for he suggests the idea in more than one comedy. His disappointed lovers, instead of retiring to nurse a broken heart, usually feel a little bit astonished at themselves, as fervent "thank God's" spring to their lips. This is not a doctrine to please the romantic, but it is a pretty fair observation of average human nature, and it is encouraging, as common sense always is, to those who wish to believe that life is safer for man than he suspects.

The second general reflection we have, after we have seen or read the play, is that the dramatist has made us look far beneath the social cloak which his characters wear, and has showed them to be all much alike. This is the work, of course, of all great dramatists; of Shakespeare, and of Molière, and of the Ancients, but as Shaw goes about it, we have a feeling that he is peculiarly of our times. He has the special kind of sophistication which comes of much study of a sociological kind, much brooding on the effect of economic pressure on society to-day, much disillusion of democratic principles. Here is a group of people with a quite normal and praiseworthy desire to get on in the world. Candida's father looks pretty hopeless at first; he was a hard-fisted unkind employer, who squeezed every possible penny out of his employees. His benighted attitude towards the working-man caused a rift between him and his enlightened son-in-law. In fact, before the play opened, Morell had done what he could to prevent his father-in-

law from getting any contracts with the town authorities. It was a matter of conscience not to permit an oppressor of the poor to pocket the money that should have gone to his workmen. Seeing there was no other way to prosper, the father-in-law then raised wages, in order to get sufficient reputation to win back his contracts. We are not prompted to praise his motives highly; we are almost ready to call him a hopeless old rascal, but Shaw then forces upon us the reflection that Morell's method of operation is the same, though in another sphere. What people think of him counts far more heavily than any consciousness of absolute right and wrong. His father-in-law's pride was hurt when he was accused of being a slave-driver, but he remained a slave-driver at heart. Morell's pride was hurt when the poet pointed out to him that his nature was really coarse, but his nature did not for that reason become finer. Candida, supposed to be the frank person in the group, is only more subtle than her father and her husband, otherwise she too operates by the same principles. She enjoyed having the poet make love to her, but when she faced the prospect of being his wife and leaving the home which she had made comfortable in her own way, of course she found high-sounding reasons for making no change. Her position is symbolized by the picture which the poet had presented to her in order to cheer up her drab and unæsthetic life. On the wall of Morell's study there hangs a large reproduction of Titian's *Virgin of the Assumption*. Candida put it in her husband's study because it was a religious subject; also because she didn't like to claim it as a personal gift; also because she didn't understand what it was really about. Morell was willing to have it there because it was a religious subject; also because he suspected the

poet knew more about it than he did; also because it flattered him into thinking the poet's interest in the family was really in him. But the lovely picture is entirely foreign to every one in the group except the poet himself. When he leaves the house it remains as a sort of tragic vestige of a good taste which once crossed that threshold. The father-in-law phrased the domestic attitude towards it when he told Candida, "Of course I don't 'old with that pictur, Candy; but still it's a 'igh class, fust-rate work of art; I can see that."

After reading or seeing *Candida*, one can understand better why Bernard Shaw is called a radical thinker. It isn't that he wishes to upset society, nor to convert us to a cut-and-dried programme of reform. It isn't even that he wishes to expose the shams in our thinking and in our conduct. It is simply that he helps us to be more honest with ourselves. The conventions by which we live, and which we so easily come to believe are eternal truths, are after all only conventions, useful, in their way admirable, but not sacrosanct. The ideas with which we start our life may really be eternal verities, or they may be only useful conventions. Shaw helps us to see which they are. In *Candida* the poet, the minister, and his wife all utter sound truths, and perhaps the poet is distinguished from the others by knowing when he is uttering truths. But most of us are less intelligent in such matters than we might be, and our lack of intelligence makes us take life harder than need be; makes us perhaps more severe to our fellows than is just, and certainly prevents us from finding the good humour which pervades sane experience.

This sort of honesty we like to call modern, and we say that Shaw is peculiar to our time. But of course

intellectual integrity is nothing new. When it has appeared in any age it has produced that effect of liberation for intelligent readers, which we feel in reading Bernard Shaw. It is further from the point to say that Shaw is an original writer than to observe that he is one of the great.

XIV
MODERN IRISH POETRY

XIV

MODERN IRISH POETRY

Modern Irish poetry has had a strange good fortune. Intensely national in its origin, it has qualities which appeal to all English-speaking peoples. The Irish like it for Irish as well as for poetical reasons, but the rest of us love it as a singular revelation of the human soul in all places and in all times.

It began as one of those revivals which characterized poetic tendencies in more than one part of Europe during the nineteenth century. A certain parallel can be set up between it and the modern poetry in Provence, or wherever else people strongly rooted in their past renewed old poetic traditions, and brought back once more a departed language. It had a strong affiliation with political, economic and social movements, and like the literature of Russia, it was animated by a spirit of pleading or of propaganda. Yet unlike all other movements of this sort, it issued in poetic masterpieces so pure in their own right that they make a complete appeal to readers quite out of touch with the political emotions they implied, and quite ignorant, it may be, of the propaganda they were intended to serve. This is to say, of course, that the modern Irish poets, especially the four or five who seem now to have a permanent place in world literature, happen to be geniuses in their art. Perhaps,

however, we need a further explanation, in the quality of the racial tradition which they revived and illuminated. Those of us who are Irish neither in race nor in political sympathies, pay tribute none the less to a remarkable poetic vitality in the Irish temper itself, as well as to the gifts of the individual writers whom we best know.

Part of this modern Irish movement in poetry is lost to us because it is written in the old language. The nationalistic feeling which took literary expression in the last decades of the nineteenth century either revived in English the old Irish legends and restated in their tradition the new aspirations of the country, or else cultivated the beautiful but very difficult old speech, and clothed in it the new dreams. The poets were divided as to which was the better course for their national culture. The reader in other lands to whom Gaelic is more sealed than the classic dead languages, has no right to pass judgment on this difference of programme, but he is grateful to those who put their Irish heart into English words, since they are the only ones he now can read.

The two forms in which this literature is available for the non-Irish reader is poetry, such as W. B. Yeats, "A. E.," or John Millington Synge gave us, or plays such as Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde, and others furnished for the Irish National Theatre in Dublin. We still remember with delight in this country the visits of the Irish players which not only introduced us to their charming drama, but encouraged our own writers and actors to put faith in the Little Theatre movement, as we then learned to call it. The artists of the Irish revival were all in the noble sense amateurs, lovers of their craft, and still more, lovers

of the poetic and human ideal they wished the new Ireland to serve. For them quite inevitably the professional traditions of the commercial theatre were somewhat artificial and hollow. Their acting was natural and direct, and their plays, whether read or staged, made an appeal which we were quick to call Irish, but which we wished to emulate in whatever might be native in our own drama. This aspect of Irish poetry is a large field in itself, and deserves separate discussion. We ought to notice it here, however, because for the poets and the actors who made it possible it was an integral part of their ideal to give the Irish spirit an adequate voice. Those who heard Mr. Yeats explain the movement long ago when he first visited America, remember the impression received from his assumption as axioms for the theatre, that the arts had become too far separated in the modern world, that music and poetry somehow should be brought together again, that music and poetry in the pictorial sense should somehow divide the interest in the stage, and that the play, as it unfolded before our eyes, should be a majestic or simple ritual, but in either case essentially a dance.

Though the aim of this movement was to revive old Irish legends and revitalize racial spirit, it would be a mistake to think of these poets as in any sense primitive craftsmen. It was the good fortune of Ireland in modern times to have ready for this work a group of writers singularly cultured, even sophisticated in the arts—learned folk, one might say, whose imagination had not been spoiled by their great knowledge of books or of the world, but who on the contrary turned away from the literature of sophistication which they had mastered, to the pure sources of

poetry in the imagination of their own folk. They were lovers of Irish legend in that exalted sense in which the city man is often the lover of the country—conscious of the blessing to be found in closeness to nature, and mercifully spared the dullness of spirit which habitual life too close to the soil sometimes induces. Perhaps this fortunate accident accounts to some extent for the power of these poets to address other minds than their own. Modern Irish poetry, even while it tries to perpetuate a special and peculiar tradition, sounds also with extraordinary success a cosmopolitan note.

The account, therefore, which an Irish reader would give of this beautiful literature is perhaps less important to us than a record of the values we find in it, readers of another country who must necessarily miss all those racial elements in it which are inherited and instinctive. We read these poems and plays as we read the masterpieces of far-away centuries—and what could be a greater compliment to them as works of art? We read them for their power to express our souls, or that universal part of the human soul which needs as much expression here as in Ireland. Perhaps a better understanding of the political and social origin of this poetry would detract from our present delight in it. Why replace among the accidents of time what seems to us already immortal?

What we find in this poetry is easy to name. In the first place it expresses to an unusual degree the sorrow and the passion of beauty. All great poetry does this, but the Celtic genius in these little verses and dramas touches us with poignant accents. We get from it a sense of a world in which the soul never can enjoy all the bliss it has visions of. Such regret

is here as comes to us from beautiful music, or miraculous sunlight, or moonlight on enchanted landscapes. Whether the poet is singing of fairy-land or of some intimate experience in peasant life, the accent is the same; passion and regret colour his song.

Yet the love of life implied in this passion is childlike. Even the theme of sex, which occurs in this poetry quite as often as elsewhere in literature, is spiritualized, or, as we say, made "otherworldly." The fact is hard to describe unless one has already felt it. Spiritualized is an inadequate word to put on it—the earthly passion has not been reformed or subdued or transmuted into religious values, but it seems to have been from the beginning such a passion as beings might feel who were chiefly spirits. With such a love of life, so passionate yet so otherworldly, and so full of yearning, we are almost forced to believe in a fairy world; we persuade ourselves without difficulty that in these poems such a world has been disclosed to us. When the fairies are spoken of, therefore, or enter this poetry in person, they seem to us, not intruders from another existence, but merely numerical additions to the company.

Ireland is a religious country, as we all know. We shall not be misunderstood if we say that this poetic world, this "otherworld" in which fairies are at home, is at heart pagan. By pagan we of course do not mean irreligious; we refer to those universal pieties at the base of all great religions which have to do with the hearth—sacraments of the home and the family, the remembrance of the dead, the love of children—all the virtues, in fact, which imaginative man living close to nature seems to learn from the

discipline of life itself. But this pagan world of Irish poetry differs from the Greek in that the virtues here named fuse into one total impression which is stronger than the sense of race or religion. We must be on the alert to observe in any modern Irish poet the precise places in which he refers to the fairies, or makes some implication of religious faith. He may mention a saint, or a priest may be one of the characters in his play, yet while we are under the spell of the poetry itself, the fairy and the priest and the other characters are at home in a pagan world, deeply rooted, passionate, beautiful and wistful. Nothing like it can be found on so large a scale elsewhere in literature. Since we love it so much, it may correspond to something in the general human heart not otherwise expressed.

The language of this poetry deserves perhaps a separate discussion, but here we can at least mention it as one of the first traits the non-Irish reader notices. Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory invented a language which embodies the beautiful idioms of the English-speaking Irish, and yet does no violence to the great literary tradition of our tongue. Anyone can understand it, yet perhaps nowhere on earth was it ever spoken quite in this exquisite form. The making of this speech involved much selection. It can best be described perhaps as a composite language of colourful and lovely words and phrases. The poetry, therefore, in which it is written seems more richly dressed than other things we read—as though we were looking at pictures in which the colours were all peculiarly luminous and deep. Of course the Irish wit is in it too —that effect of humour which comes from nothing frivolous or comic, but which is chiefly the reader's

happy mood at hearing a felicitous word or recognizing a miraculous insight into human nature.

The leaders of this movement, as we just observed, were all scholarly and faithful students of literature, all aware of the critical theories on the Continent as well as in England, which had to do with painting as well as poetry. Whether or not the peculiar effect which their work now has on us owes anything to some modern doctrines of painting, it is useless to inquire, but their best writing, whatever its inspiration, is as good an example as one could find of what painters now call significant form. Art at its happiest, we are told, induces in us a vision, a meaning, or a significance. It makes little difference which word we use. Critics used to say that successful art reveals a vision of beauty. The only objection to this formula is that some people confuse beauty with prettiness, and would have the artist shut his eyes therefore to sorrow, or trouble, or deformity. There is a sense in which the drama of *King Lear* opens to us a vision of beauty, but it is not a pretty vision, and the modern artist feels somewhat more comfortable if he uses the word "significance" instead. His colleague, the modern philosopher, likes to remind us that when we say a thing has meaning or significance, we are saying that the thing makes our mind go off from itself towards something else. If the flag has a meaning for us, we are astounded or shocked, perhaps, to be reminded that it is a piece of cotton or silk. Of course we knew it was, but that was not what came to mind when we thought of the flag. In painting or in poetry, if we represent a recognizable experience, if we present, for example, the picture of some oranges in a dish, or of a house on a country road, we have presented

form, something recognizable and true. But if the impression made on the audience or spectator is no more than an impression of oranges or of a house, we have not produced significant form, we have not indicated a vision—in other words, we have not created a work of art. One school of artists agreeing to this general principle would conclude that the form you paint is less important than the vision you produce, and would therefore sacrifice to that vision accuracy and representation in the form itself. They might draw the oranges or the house in queer ways, having little respect for what the eye actually sees, so long as they succeed in arousing a perception in the soul. But still another school of artists would say that the great tradition in painting or poetry has been to represent the form faithfully, so that it will be true as far as it goes, and through that faithful representation to induce that high degree of significance which renders the form not an end but only a means.

Whether or not Irish poetry in our time has been governed by such theories of art, it is a fact that to the Irish reader, as we understand, these poems and plays are faithful representations of the form of his experience. Yet they carry with them such a reach of significance that the form seems hardly important in comparison. Just what the significance is in this poetry or in other forms of art, it would be foolish to try to say; our interpretations of art are not to be defined in advance. But at least we can define the significance negatively—we can say what it is not. These poets, like the modern painters, starting from a specific picture of temporary and local experience, make the mind of the reader go off in some direction away from time and place. Towards the infinite, we

say. Towards that universal world, in other words, where universal truth, whether of human nature or of mathematics or of theology, has its home.

The chief poetic genius of the modern Irish revival is probably W. B. Yeats. He would have been a lyric poet of unusual charm had he lived at any time or in any country. But the opportunity which his own land gave him at the end of the nineteenth century seems to have called out all his gifts in the happiest way. He has written much prose—charming records of the superstitions of his people, and critical essays on the whole Irish movement. But even in his prose he remains a fascinating poet. Perhaps the best approach to his own work and to the Irish spirit is through his little essay "Dust Hath Closéd Helen's Eye," in the prose volume called *The Celtic Twilight*. In this brief chapter he writes about Mary Hynes, the fabled beauty of Ireland, and of Raftery, the blind poet who loved and sang of her. One feels immediately the parallel with Helen and Homer of old. In most of Mr. Yeats's work there is for those who care to detect it a suggestion of much reading in ancient books, an awareness of world tradition. Probably this sense is not the least of its charm, but the character of Mary Hynes, and still more the picture of Raftery and of the peculiar esteem in which the peasants held him, is not Greek but Irish—otherworldly, as we described it above. We feel that even when Mary Hynes walked the earth, her neighbours looked upon her as already a symbol of beauty, a universal expression of it—and on Raftery as the embodiment of that fatal gift which opens the artist's eyes to spiritual things and closes them to the material world.

Next after this beautiful essay one might read

two famous little plays, *The Land of Heart's Desire,* and *Cathleen Ni Houlihan.* In the first we meet that sense of a pagan world which marks all this poetry, the sense of a lure of beauty which can be referred neither to the body nor to the soul, as we ordinarily distinguish between them—a lure out of this world of fact and time and place into an infinite fairy existence. The picture of life here dramatized, affects us like exquisite music. We are transported, that is, into a world of sheer beauty, delight, tinged with regret. But when music stops we return to earth, as we say. From the Irish mood the return is less swift, something in us is more permanently persuaded. In *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* Mr. Yeats wrote the most remarkable of propaganda poems in his time. Cathleen is the incarnation of Ireland; the love of her lures the hero to his death, as in the other plays the lure of the fairy world drew the child heart out of the home. Here again we feel that the terms in which the idea is expressed have become universal. We could apply the image of Cathleen and her fascination to any ideal of patriotism, or to any other aspiration. The poet has looked for a permanent attitude of humanity, and has caught it in such an image as transcends the ordinary limitations of language.

Of his poems it is hard to say which is the loveliest. Even those on strictly Irish themes, like *The Wanderings of Oisin,* have their meaning to those of us to whom the legend is vague. But perhaps the reader in non-Irish lands will always find his profit chiefly in poems like *The Sad Shepherd,* which gives the portrait of a man who might have lived in peace of life and death had not both offered to his sight the constant glimpse of beauty. Or we may prefer the *Stolen Child,* in which

the fairies ask us to leave this unpoetic world and join their pale and exquisite existence——

"Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand."

Those of us who are more consciously literary in our tastes, and who believe that one of the great benefits of much reading is that from it we come to direct experience in life with meanings already stored up in our hearts, enjoy such a poem as *He Remembers Forgotten Beauty*, with the famous beginning:

"When my arms wrap you round I press
My heart upon the loveliness
That has long faded from the world;
The jewelled crowns that kings have hurled
In shadowy pools, when armies fled;
The love-tales wrought with silken thread
By dreaming ladies upon cloth
That has made fat the murderous moth."

And perhaps the reader who has visited Ireland, and keeps precious memories of the life he saw there, will always like best Mr. Yeats's shorter poems in which some little picture of human beings and some brief casual word of theirs, become permanently significant. A well-known illustration is *The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water.*

"I heard the old, old men say,
'Everything alters,
And one by one we drop away.'
They had hands like claws, and their knees
Were twisted like the old thorn trees
By the waters.
I heard the old, old men say,
'All that's beautiful drifts away
Like the waters.'"

Dr. Douglas Hyde devoted his great genius to the translation of old Irish stories and to the revival of the ancient language. For that reason he is less widely known than his colleagues who wrote in English. But wherever poetry is seriously studied his reputation will be high as an artist and scholar. Some of us never forget his translation of the Irish folk-tale, *The Well at the End of the World*, and still less his mystic and haunting play about Raftery, the blind poet, who, even after his death returned to earth and visited the small house of two young people on their wedding day, in order to save them from poverty and sorrow.

Lady Gregory has written delightful plays in a comic vein, and has served as a guiding spirit for the Irish National Theatre. Her place in literature, however, will probably rest upon her gorgeous translation and adaptation of the story of Cuchulain. Her book, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, is already a classic. Competent critics have pointed out the skill with which she simplified and adapted the stories of Ireland's legendary hero to the taste of her modern Irish readers, and of her readers elsewhere in the modern world; she is a rare instance of scholarly temperament and artistic tact. Perhaps the reader outside of Ireland will care less for the adventures of Cuchulain himself than for some of the incidental episodes, especially for the story of Deirdre, the greatest of all Irish heroines, whose destiny her beauty made sad.. Most of the other poets of this Irish movement have given us some versions of Deirdre's story. She now is a part of the world language for beauty, along with Helen and Iseult and Guinevere.

An Irishman would probably tell us that the most remarkable person in the movement is "A. E.," Mr.

George W. Russell, painter, poet, mystic, economist and critic. Mr. Russell's many-sided genius has been devoted with profligate unselfishness to whatever Irish cause seemed to need him. He probably has spent himself in too many directions to leave a strong memory in any one of them. But a discriminating reader will note a certain difference between his poems and those of Yeats and the others. He is, as we just said, a mystic, not a literal-minded believer in fairies, and not simply a projector of a pagan world, but a mystic in the traditional sense of the word. In his thought material life and circumstances, the countryside he loves to paint and describe, the people he meets, the accidents which befall him, all fuse into one spiritual interpretation. When he writes of the landscape it would be hard to say whether nature for him is an image of man, or whether man is the image of nature. Harder still to say what both are images of, though we feel they indicate some remote meaning. As good an instance as any from his poems is the beautiful *Destiny*—

"Like winds or waters were her ways:
The flowing tides, the airy streams,
Are troubled not by any dreams;
They know the circle of their days.

Like winds or waters were her ways:
They heed not immemorial cries;
They move to their high destinies
Beyond the little voice that prays.

She passed into her secret goal,
And left behind a soul that trod
In darkness, knowing not of God,
But craving for its sister soul."

John Millington Synge was influenced by Mr. Yeats to study the language and the life of his own people.

Perhaps Synge would not otherwise have turned his attention to Ireland. He had started a literary career with his eyes on the Continent and with his head full of European literary traditions and theories. He was primarily a follower of art for art's sake, much like George Moore himself, though with a temperament naturally more profound. Perhaps he came back to his own people as much out of a sophisticated weariness with modern life as because of Yeats's advice. In any case he set himself deliberately to construct a beautiful, if artificial, language in which to write of Ireland, and he collected laboriously the materials to make his plays. For some time he lived in the bleak Aran Islands among the poor fisher folk, sharing their discomforts and poverty, listening, as he says, to the gorgeous images which burst through their talk, noting their simple patience in the presence of danger and death, reading their character, as it were, in terms of the sea which gave them their bleak livelihood, and then took away their lives from them, one by one. He tells the story of this visit in his prose book, *Aran Islands*, which ought to be read as a prelude to his plays.

Whether it was his temperament or his peculiar approach to the Irish movement, there was always something in Synge's work which distinguished him from the others. It is hard to feel that the political and economic propaganda behind the movement mattered very much to him. He had a detachment from the emotional part of the tradition and a clear-sightedness when he looked at his own people which none of the others, perhaps, would have cared to share. Perhaps he might have written about Italian or German peasant life with the same kind of sympathy that he brought to the *Aran Islands*. In other words, he differs from

his colleagues in being universal without being first Irish. This fact is illustrated in one of the shorter and certainly one of his greatest plays, *Riders to the Sea*. A simple picture of a fishing home in the Aran Islands, where the women through the years have grown accustomed to having men drowned in the storms; almost all the men in this family are gone, and the story is of the end of the last. The sea, as these people talk about it, is identical with fate, a fate so overpowering that the only attitude of the survivors is silence and patience. The beauty of this little play is quite beyond description, not to be entirely grasped even by reading it. It must be acted to be understood. On the stage the grouping of the persons makes the emotion poignant. The old mother who hugs the fireside off in one corner, lost in her memories, comes into the centre of the room as soon as the dead body is brought in. Here she is in her own element of grief; being the oldest, she is the most experienced mourner, and the others recognize her tragic pre-eminence. But there is less that is essentially Irish in this play than in any of the shorter pieces by Mr. Yeats or Douglas Hyde. It might well have been written by a great poet of any race, of people who deal with the sea anywhere.

Of Synge's other dramas, the one that has attracted most attention in Ireland and outside is the *Playboy of the Western World*. The play created a riot in Dublin, and again in New York when it was performed there; that is, it created a riot so far as Irishmen were concerned. Others wonder why the riot occurred. The drama represents a peculiarly fascinating and irresponsible character, studied, one would say, entirely for his own sake as a human phenomenon, without reference to Ireland and its political problems or its spiritual

ideals. Probably the Irish audience, accustomed to a background of propaganda in Irish poetry, read into quite harmless lines and situations some disturbing implications. There is a story that after the row at the first Dublin performance, Synge was asked what the play really meant, and he replied rather wearily that it didn't mean anything. An artist could understand the answer, but it may have sounded cynical to his fellow countrymen, who were staking all they had on the liberation and the development of their country.

The less important plays of Synge should be read in the same mood, and his small body of poetry also. He was a lover of beauty less in the Irish sense than as any traditional artist would be. The story of Deirdre for him is a tragic praise of beauty in general. Though he had a remarkable faculty for composing a language out of the fine phrases he heard in the native speech, he had not that flashing insight, that illuminating turn of phrase which characterizes Irish wit in the best work of Hyde and the others. Synge was simply a great writer of our time who happened to be an Irishman, and who turned his cosmopolitan training to work on Irish themes. His early death removed him as it seemed symbolically from the national group of which he was one of the brightest illustrations, yet to which he did not seem altogether to belong.

Many other writers ought to be mentioned in an account of modern Irish poetry, if there were but space for the names. Lord Dunsany is known to most readers, and certainly Padraic Colum. But there is room to mention here James Stephens, novelist and poet, in some ways the most Irish of all these writers, as other countries imagine the Irish character to be. Perhaps his genius falls short of Yeats's gifts or Synge's. But

in his prose, as well as in the verse, he has that playboy spirit which Synge described in his famous character, with something in him impish and elfish, something of fairy irresponsibility, something of that uncanny directness which makes the speech of children at times terrible. Any reader of modern fiction knows his great novel, *Crock of Gold*, and that other story, *The Charwoman's Daughter*, published in the United States as *Mary, Mary*. Some of us have read also *Here Are Ladies*, and his volume of Irish fairy tales, recounted in the maddest of happy moods. His *Collected Poems* appeared in 1926. The volume illustrates his peculiar control over whimsical speech, his strong sense of humour, his gift for anger and wrath, and his profound love of beauty. You cannot tell as you turn the page what on earth the next poem will be like; he is miraculously unexpected. But this caprice of whim has a unity of its own, and his poems come together in our memory as a total expression of that fascinating land which even for those who have never seen it, is a symbol of romance and poetry. Just how Stephens differs from the other poets may be seen perhaps by a comparison of his poem, *Barbarians*, with " A. E.'s " *Destiny* already quoted—

"I pause beside the stream, and hear
The waters talking on the way;
If I had a proper ear
I could tell you what they say!

Yon lovely tree against the sky,
Which the sun first rests upon,
Has a message for my eye;
If I had a proper one!

On the golden heath a wind,
Whispered to me as I stood;
If I had a proper mind
I could answer, so I could!

I am deaf and dumb and blind!
No reply can I invent
When a stream, a tree, a wind,
Asks am I intelligent!"

THE END

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
NORTHUMBERLAND PRESS LIMITED, NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE